

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP15 GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome back to Love In A F*cked Up World the podcast, where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections with each other because our resistance movements are made of our relationships, and are only as strong as they are.

This is the last episode of 2025, and yesterday I had a beautiful conversation with Hope and Ciro about our collaboration on the podcast this year, which has been a totally new kind of project for each of us and a new team to be working together in. I'm feeling really overwhelmed with gratitude for each of them and all the other people who've been part of this experiment, including the people I've interviewed whose episodes we've released in 2025: adrienne, Tourmaline, Morgan, Shira, Mariame, Weyam, Prentice, Kelly and Jessica. Really grateful.

And I'm so excited about the episodes to come and grateful to everyone who's been giving us feedback and who's joined the discussion boards on Patreon, where we've been brainstorming about where the podcast should go next, and talking about the ideas that we're sharing here.

It's such a really intense, hard time in the world. And it means a lot to me to be meeting so many people who give a fuck about fighting back and caring for each other under these really impossible circumstances. It's really giving me energy to continue to be in these conversations.

I'm also really grateful to everybody at Verso Books for all the work on the upcoming second edition of Mutual Aid. It's been really meaningful to me spending time this summer looking back at the last five years and writing my reflections about what I've learned about mutual aid since the book came out in 2020. I'm hoping those reflections will be useful as we keep struggling to survive and respond to the cascading disasters. I recently posted an excerpt from the new material from Mutual Aid on the podcast Patreon, which you can find at patreon.com/deanspade, and you can read it for free there, and I'll be posting some more excerpts in the coming months. The new edition will be out March 31st, and you can also pre-order it over on Patreon.

As I head into January, I am going to be working on the new edition of my first book, Normal Life, which was first published in 2011 by South End Press, and then again after South End closed, in 2015 by Duke University Press. And it's heavy reflecting on trans politics at this time and thinking about what has changed in the last 15 years. And I'm also grateful to get to do that thinking and be talking to a lot of my closest friends and collaborators who work in trans resistance and trans studies, and think critically about this moment and what is required of all of us.

On that note, for the final episode of 2025, I'm sharing the last conversation I was able to record in person with my friend Morgan Bassichis. Morgan and I are planning to record more together in 2026. Very excited to have those dates already on the calendar. But for now, here's our conversation about giving and receiving feedback.

Welcome to the podcast. I'm here with my friend Morgan Bassichis, who --

Morgan: [joking] Business partner.

Dean: Sorry. My business partner and boss Morgan Bassichis, who is a somatic therapist and an organizer doing lots of abolitionist and anti-zionist work for many years, and a big influence on me and on this book, and this podcast.

Morgan: [joking] Only the good parts.

Dean: Just the good parts. I take credit for everything that's a mistake. And I want us to talk about feedback, about how to give and receive feedback about why it's hard. I want us to like get into that. It's a topic that comes up so regularly in my work supporting mutual aid groups and like chapter based organizing groups, and also like roommate conflict and between lovers and friends. And so I thought we could dive into feedback.

Morgan: [joking] Well, my first question is, is this a passive aggressive way of giving me feedback?

Dean: No comment.

Morgan: No comment. Okay. Um, so why is feedback important?

Dean: Well, I think that we live in a context in which most of us are pretty de-skilled at it, and the result of that is that we don't tell people when things are hard. We're like super afraid they're gonna be defensive, and we're afraid that like they'll feel like we're throwing them away. And when people give us feedback, we're afraid that we're like a terrible person 'cause they said we made a mistake, or we hurt their feelings. And so people are locked down about it and then instead we hold it in, and sometimes only blow up once it's kind of gone really far. Or we tell everybody else but that person what our complaints are.

And it can be very disorganizing for groups and it can cause people to like take sides and feel ganged up, on and be ganged up on, or be kind of like iced out. Like it's just like the indirectness I think is maybe one of the biggest sources of harm in our communities, honestly. Like, I think it leads to some of the really, really bad behavior that

we most want to change.

Morgan: Hmm. And maybe even bigger than harm, just like, um, difficulty, like, just difficulty. Like, it just seems like a skill we really never get taught. And there's, so I know that so much fear can come up for me around it of like, is this feedback, is it even grounded? Is this feedback or is this just projection? Or is this, you know, what is this?

So. You just said it, but I'll ask you again just 'cause I think it's worthwhile. What's hard about giving feedback, giving _or_ receiving? What's hard about it?

Dean: I mean, I think living in carceral society, what's hard is fear that everything's 'all or nothing'. Fear that I'm saying if I say "it's hard for me when you're late sometimes," that somehow that's gonna come off as "you're a terrible organizer or a terrible friend". Or if I say "it would help me if you did the dishes more" then it means I'm saying that you're filthy and I hate living with you. You know, just like, or that if you offer me those things, it's a character indictment or whatever, a character assassination, I don't know what exactly the words are. But the kind of inability to hold it lightly and to be like, oh, this is just a comment on this one particular behavior and how it lands for this person. It's not a comment on who I am. That seems to be very hard for us.

And I mean, I, I think it kind of leads to everything. Like I, I just see this all the time in groups. People just are holding their tongue in a group for a really long time and then blowing up. Or needing everyone to join them in a really strong feeling that if they'd gotten a little more connection earlier and been able to be like, "oh, hey, I feel kinda left out", or "This doesn't quite land with me", and kind of connected with others and tried to influence things, instead of just holding onto it and getting more and more and more upset and then needing to kind of burn it down. Like that's one of the patterns that I definitely see disorganizing our groups.

I think that most frequently when I'm asked for advice by a friend about something stressing them out or when I'm asking for advice, what's stressing either of us out is usually like we're withholding feedback that we need to give in a situation that we're in, or we're, or we've gotten some and we're like scared. Do you feel like that's true for you?

Morgan: That's, I think that just got approved as true in my mind. Yeah, that's true.

Dean: That rings with you?

Morgan: That rings with me. So we're scared. We get scared, 'cause

we're like, what if this is gonna ruin the relationship, ruin the connection, or what if this is gonna create distance or create fallout or whatever?

So how then do we, do you have any suggestions on like what are simple ways to do it?

Dean: Yeah, I mean, one thing that I've really been working on is like in groups doing a little feedback workshop. Just like having people talk about why feedback is important, and what it's like to live in a carceral society. I often have people do an exercise where you get with a partner and you each say one time when you gave feedback and it went really poorly, and one time when you got feedback and it went really poorly. And then one time when it went well and, and one time, you know, in either direction.

And so that we just even start talking about what we already noticed in our lives about some of our preferences, about what seems to help. Not that there's any guarantee that if I find out that you like to have feedback verbally and not on text, that doesn't mean I, I'm never gonna text you feedback if I need to. But like, just even knowing, talking about it as a thing together and finding out that we have preferences and maybe finding out some of our friends' or lovers' or group members' preferences, like that can start to loosen up the possibility that we're gonna practice this as a group.

And I think that like roommates can do that, friends, lovers, anybody can do that. Kinda like, let's talk about feedback, like what's it like for you? You know, what, when does it work best? And then you can make a commitment to do it about really small things.

Morgan: Right. Almost talk about it abstractly first.

Dean: Yeah. And then be like, let's do it about something small every week. Let's do it about, you know, you were late or I, I wish that I'd gotten a say in what we were gonna watch or whatever. Like have that practice being non-defensive and practice being like willing to give the feedback like this doesn't mean anything about you. It's just one small observation I'm having about something that landed on me a certain way. And I think if people practice on the small stuff instead of not giving any feedback until things are giant, we'd get more skilled up and it would build trust. Like, oh, I know that Morgan gave me feedback and it doesn't mean that they're not gonna care about me anymore.

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: Or they think I'm bad, you know?

Morgan: Yeah, 'cause we all really want to trust like that you would

tell me if you saw something that I didn't see, or you would tell me... Like that would be horrifying to me if I felt like you couldn't or wouldn't tell me. So it's such a big, it's, it's actually what we want. Even if we're scared of it, it's a deeper, it's actually what we long for in our relationships.

Dean: It's what we long for on one level, but on another level, I just wanna be perfect, and I want you to think I'm perfect, and I want you to be perfect, right? So like that, that's the surface internalized capitalism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchal level that's so in the way. It's like, can I just handle that I am definitely gonna sometimes hurt your feelings, and definitely gonna need to be reminded of things I forget? Or I'm gonna be lost in my own stuff and miss something important in our friendship or whatever. And if I knew that, if I was like, yes, I'm totally imperfect and my friend's feedback is like a source of care for our relationship and an investment in my wellbeing, that would be awesome.

And so maybe we need to like make that as an agreement between us rather than just hoping that I, that we never need to give any feedback, you know? Like that feels like how it is now, you know.

Morgan: [joking] This is, I'm fully dissociated now because you've triggered me. But, um, so it seems like there's skill involved. I mean, it's like, it's like we can all do this. And it's also like a muscle, like any muscle that we can build. There's skill in both giving feedback in a way that actually is supportive, actually is towards, like, I can imagine in organizations when feedback can sometimes be used to like subtly be like, "you're bad" or, or, "I don't want you involved", or "I don't want you as a leader". Versus, "I really want you to make your best contribution to this work and I'm so invested in doing this together. Here's what I think could make this even stronger. Here's what I think could make your contribution even stronger."

What's a skill that you've seen work for giving feedback in a way that is supportive and contributes to what you want to see?

Dean: I think it really helps to just tell somebody why you're giving it. Like, "I really love working with you, and this one little thing is sometimes bugging me and I wanna make sure we have a really clear channel." Or just something that first honors that you care about the connection. I think that feels helpful.

What have you, what do you notice is helpful?

Morgan: That reminds me of the 'feedback sandwich'.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Morgan: Um, yeah, that resonates. If you care about the relationship, lead with that.

Dean: Yeah. And you can always find something, even though it's very abstract. We both care about environmental justice, you know, whatever, like anything that brings you on the same side.

Morgan: Yeah. I think what can help me is owning what I'm seeing, what that brings up in me, not as truth necessarily, but as what's happening for me.

You know, like if I find, um, just our communication around this project that we've been doing or something, it brings up for me this sense of like, oh, maybe you just wanna do it on your own ultimately, you don't really want me involved. And so acknowledging that that's my experience of it. I'm giving you feedback about a behavior, and that it brings up this thing for me.

Dean: Yeah. Which I know may not be true.

Morgan: This may not be true.

Dean: And I wanna give you an opportunity to help clear it up with me.

Morgan: Right. And intimacy. It's letting you see it. Remember that whole phrase: "in to me you see", intimacy. I'm letting you see. I'm letting you see. And so it's an intimate thing. I'm letting you see how, how this feels. So it's not just about you it's also about me.

Dean: Yeah. I'm actually planning an event with someone who I really, really admire and don't know super well, but we have had like a nice time together socially in the past, who lives in another city. And their emails recently started to seem, I was like, is there something kind of short here? Like is it okay? And I noticed myself wanting to go into just like appease. And then I just was like, oh, I could just ask them like, "how's the event going for you? I can't really read the tone of emails that well sometimes. Is there anything you need? I would love for this to be a good experience. It's okay if we don't do it."

And then they told me all about how they were stressed out about some other aspects of the event that don't have to do with what we're doing, but now we're more on the same team together about it. You know what I mean? And I was like, it's kind of risky, right, to like ask for that greater intimacy with someone I don't know super well. But then I was just like, we have the same values. Why wouldn't I? What's the worst that could happen? They'll, you know, maybe they'll tell me this one thing I'm doing has really irritated them. I'd rather know. Or maybe they'll be like, "you're delusional, Dean". And then that's fine too.

Morgan: So feedback can sometimes just be like a question that is... 'cause that's not really feedback.

Dean: Well, it's like the tone of their email. I'm giving them feedback about the tone of their email.

Morgan: Right.

Dean: You know, and how it's landing on me.

Morgan: Right. You're letting them know how it landed on me. Right. Right.

Dean: Yeah. I'm asking what's really going on here. I could have instead been like, "they're difficult" or "they're, they hate me" or "they don't wanna do this", you know, I could have stopped answering their emails 'cause I'm scared. There's so many directions that we all go, instead of just being like, "oh, I'm just gonna assume the best about this person and, and actually be direct."

Morgan: Totally.

Dean: Which went great.

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: Because I think people are relieved by that. That's trustworthy behavior.

Morgan: Okay. So then on the receiving end, when someone's then checking out a assumption or checking out how something's landing with them about you, or giving you feedback, what's the skill to receive that?

Dean: Yeah. One thing is that we can want people to give us feedback lovingly, but they don't have to.

So ideally we wanna be open to feedback, even if it came with some harshness. I just really believe in that. And especially if for any reason this person might be feeling vulnerable, they might, it might be barbed (which most people feel vulnerable for a lot of reasons). And so I try to be like, can I be excited about this feedback and open to it even if it didn't come in a super sweet package?

'Cause one of the worst mistakes we make is to criticize how the feedback was given and miss the chance. So I'm like, I'm looking for what's true here. I don't have to decide everything is true. But I am looking for what's true. And if I'm feeling defensive, can I talk to a friend about it and get some help figuring out what might be true? But

I'm really like, if someone's giving me feedback, it's 'cause on some level or another, I'm important to them in some way. Like because I'm involved in something, or 'cause they see me as influential on something, or like in the way of something, but I'm...it's some kind of investment.

So I feel like my role is to be like, this is actually connective. Even if I'm scared or uncomfortable or I wish it was delivered differently, I want to find out more about it and be curious. And not be like, "it wasn't me, I didn't do it, I didn't mean it." You know, all of those moves are like very typical in carceral systems, like that's what we do 'cause we're afraid we're gonna be thrown away. But usually feedback actually doesn't need to be a throwaway if we keep the connection, you know?

Morgan: Right. So just like maybe the -- and there's no like one prescriptive way to do it -- but we're just, you're offering kind of like potential ideas. Starting giving me feedback by saying "I really care about our relationship." And then maybe receiving it, we can also say, "thank you for taking the risk to give me this." Yes, that must have been scary.

Dean: Yeah.

Morgan: So immediately we're acknowledging like you didn't need to do it perfectly, that's an investment in our relationship.

Dean: Yes.

Morgan: And that's de-escalating, intimacy building, and trust building right there.

Dean: Yes. And it may not always be that we're thinking to say that exact thing, but I think we'll know. The other thing is like, I noticed this with, I've had a lot of students over the years of 20 years of teaching, and some students are so defensive about feedback on their writing. And like, you're literally paying me to do this, you know, but you don't want the feedback.

So I like to ask myself, where am I acknowledging that I'm a learner? If I go in knowing like, I'm like, you know, "Morgan knows more about somatics than me, I'm a learner in a conversation about that." Then will I be a little more relaxed if I get feedback?

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: Like are there places in life or when we're new at organizing, and it's our first time writing that press release or making that post or you know, playing that role at the action or whatever. I think everyone thinks they're supposed to already be perfect at it and know

how to do everything.

Also with sex, that's another thing everyone thinks they're already supposed to know how to do it right. And actually we need to give each other tons of feedback in sex, and in relating, you know? Like, "oh, that's how that lands on me."

There's no way anyone can know that about another person. So how can I go in, as often as possible, being like, "I'm definitely a learner, I hope for feedback." Then it won't be as shocking when it comes, you know? It's just like an attitude that helps me.

Morgan: It feels like, like it's, it can be such a shortcut to what we want. It can be such a shortcut, like to the deeper relationship, to the better sex, to the better collaboration. Like we're so scared of it. 'Cause we're so scared of not being perfect and getting thrown away that actually it can just be like, it was like, "oh my god, there's a such quicker door to the thing we want."

Dean: Yes.

Morgan: So I'm just noticing that, oh, it's risky, but there's high reward there.

Dean: Yeah. Other people are different from us. I think the belief in sex, but also in friendship and at work, whatever, is like everyone should be able to read each other's minds. And it's like, if I can't, yeah...

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: [Joking] I mean, you and I can do that, but others can't.

You know, if I can't read your mind, then something's wrong, we're disconnected. In reality, everybody contains multitudes. I have no idea how the facilitation of that meeting landed on you, or what that sounded like or why, why you looked scared during that part of the action, or why you stopped me in that part of our sex experience. You know, like all of that is like an opportunity to find out about like what goes on in you.

Morgan: Right.

Dean: That's actually wonderful and interesting. But the kind of perfectionism is, I should have already known everything about what you needed or how you would feel, and I should have never said something that you didn't like. This is like, this is not realistic.

Morgan: Right. One thing you just said is like, um, I think, is that you can also ask for feedback. You can say, "do you have any, yeah,

how's our sex landing with you?" You know, whatever. We can ask for feedback in any of our relationships.

Dean: Yeah. Yes. I think, I feel like I have a lot of friendships at this point in my life where people are really good at being like, "this is how I feel, Dean, 'cause you're not around a lot." And then we get to have a real conversation about what helped them feel my presence when I'm not around a lot. Like "this event, if you came to this event with me, it would be particularly meaningful. I don't care as much about this one." Or, you know, things like that, like that can just get to the heart of the matter, tell each other what we want. Don't make anyone guess.

Morgan: Right. And also you can also ask "what kind of feedback do you want?" Like if you're, what kind of feedback are you looking for?

Dean: Yeah. Yeah, and even just telling our friends when something like kind of hurts our feelings or the joke wasn't funny or they didn't talk to us enough at the party. Like, just like I recently had a friend tell me something along those lines. They were like, I know this is all in my head, but I felt jealous in this one thing. It was so intimacy building.

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: To be like, oh my god, I'm so glad you told me.

Morgan: Yeah.

Dean: I love being with you and want to invite you to things. You know, like just instead of it being like they had to feel stupid for feeling jealous, they told me about it. I thought it was like so beautiful. It wasn't an accusation to hear it, and it was so fun to be able to remind them how much I enjoy them, you know.

Any final words on feedback, Morgan?

Morgan: [joking] Um, I'm no longer accepting it for this moment.

Dean: Uh, we'll put that in the show notes.

Morgan: Do you have any feedback about, for me, about this episode that we just, that we're on the verge of completing?

Dean: You looked gorgeous throughout.

Morgan: Thank you. [joking] I have a voice for -- a face for radio.

Dean: Good one.

Morgan: Um, thank you for your feedback.

Dean: Thank you Morgan.

Thanks so much to Morgan Bassichis, who it must be said, has a face not just for radio, but for billboards and podcast videos. I would think maybe TV also.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of _Love In A F*cked Up World_. This podcast is based on the book of the same name, which is out now from Algonquin Press, and you can buy it on our Patreon at patreon.com/deanspade, and all proceeds will benefit the podcast.

Love In A F*cked Up World is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. Thank you to Ciro, Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole, and everyone else who has helped with this podcast. Our theme music is, "I've Been Wondering", by The Ballet.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help to build and sustain strong relationships and strong movements.

I hope that you'll keep listening, subscribe, and share this episode with the people in your life.