

**Profiling Constellation Work: A Talk with Ali Mezey**  
**Transcript**

Ali Mezey: I'm Ali Mezey and for the last four years I've been specializing in applying constellation work to working with people grappling with addiction, and that's both sex addiction as well as drug addiction.

**Grace Gregory: So, what is constellation work? If you know a bit about its history and maybe who developed the method, if you could share...**

AM: I do. I'd be happy to. It began around 40 years ago, the founder is Bert Hellinger, who's a German, who has quite a rich history from being a POW in World War II and then becoming a missionary and spending many years with the Zulu people in South Africa, and during which time he really saw how much more peacefully people were when they lived with the dead, when they recognized that their relationship to previous generations and lived those relationships. He eventually came back to Europe and became a psychoanalyst and was very influenced by Virginia Satir, and primal scream apparently, and a variety of different things and then really started to recognize that subjective experience, what each of us is able to experience through our bodies, even in relationship to strangers, can have really vital information. So, he developed this work whereby people can come together, not knowing each other and are able to represent people's family dynamics by representing individuals in the family and reveal a tremendous amount of information about what the difficulties and blockages are to the love and support that's coming through family lineages, or not.

I mean, that is just one part. It's quite a deep philosophy and a really complex technique, but he was just, still is, he's like 92, just an amazing philosopher and came to really understand so many of the governing laws, you can go so far as to say, of how humans function well and how they don't. So, by these orders of love that he developed he was really able to see that if parents are taking more than they're giving, or if people are out of order, or if people are being excluded, very difficult things will ensue. So, this is a technique to be able to both identify, through the brilliance of our bodies, what is out of whack, basically, in a family system and how people are having to compensate for those imbalances or exclusions, and traumas that have not been dealt with -- that's a really big part of this work is that whatever traumas haven't been resolved in the people to whom they happened and with the people they happened with, or that are involved in that trauma, then they will get passed down through the generations, which is now being corroborated in the scientific field of epigenetics.

**GG: Right. I have so many questions, so how is that stored in our body? How is that information stored?**

AM: This is such an interesting question. I mean, of course the field of somatics talks about how our bodies are tissues, carry information, and memory, and trauma, so that's certainly one direction you can go and, I think there's still quite a mystery as to how our cells actually store information. I mean, our bodies are the expression of all of our history, not just our own family history through our DNA, but also every mineral, every component, the oxygen we breathe is part of this whole universe, so we really are a living expression of creation, of course. So how you are expressing it as opposed to how I'm expressing it has so much to do, obviously, with increasing particulars about who your people are, where they came from, what they experienced, what you experienced as a child, how those injuries, physical, sexual, cultural, have affected how you hold your body, how you express your body, how you feel in your heart and how your psyche has dealt with all of these things.

I know that's kind of vague because I don't know the actual mechanism by which that happens, though epigenetics, I guess, is getting more and more clear about how genes either turn on or turn off to express diseases, for example, according to the trauma we've been exposed to.

**GG: So, the word constellation, what exactly does that refer to?**

AM: Of course, people think about it in terms of astrology, I think a lot. People think that that's what it's about. I think about it as the geometry of relationship, as the stars are in relationship to each other, so are we in our family dynamics. If I were to ask you to place on the table with salt shakers, or symbols, or anything, or on the floor with markers or other people, you would know just from your own innate body understanding of proximity, of spatial relationship, exactly how it feels to be in relationship to these people and where they would be on the floor in relation to you. So, it really is about feeling what those proximities are and how they are, and you get a tremendous amount of information by seeing and experiencing that.

**GG: Okay, so what makes it bodywork or somatic therapy is that you're... I mean, I don't want to answer that for you, but from what I understand you are interpreting those bodily messages and that bodily information that other people store that they may not even know they store?**

AM: So, one of the many things I love about this work is, in a way... I mean, the word "interpreting" is such an interesting word, because when you actually place people on the floor, for example, it doesn't really require interpretation to already have the immediate sensation of what that feels like to be in that relationship. So if you, for example, or if one places themselves and then places their mother 10 feet away, and her back is turned, it's like pre-interpretation. Just by my describing that, we know what that feels like.

**GG: There's a significance to that.**

AM: There's an immediate, almost like a biological - it's innate in us that our bodies understand and experience what that's like. So, that's already given me, as a facilitator, that's already given me a huge amount of information [about] how somebody experiences their relationship to their mother.

That said, the more one knows about Constellation Work and all kinds of other things like attachment theory, and trauma work, and all kinds of things, also inform me to understand that much more about what that placement is expressing. For me, it's a combination, I'm feeling in my body, I'm listening to what a client or the other participants are feeling in their bodies, and from that we make meaning together.

**GG: Just literally speaking, so how are the different family members or other parts of the system, or the constellation, how are they represented in the space? With mats, right?**

AM: I personally work a lot with mats because I work in small groups and sometimes I'm working with people who are in active detox and they're not as able to hold focus or feel their bodies as much. So I work a lot with just the information that comes through spatial relationship and then it's kind of gravity, what people are able to feel in their bodies on top of that. But in a classic constellation group, for example, we ask other participants in the group to take on the, you could say, take on the role, or we call it represent because it really is like standing in and just feeling what that person may or may not have felt that is relevant to the situation.

There can be a lot of incredulity about, *well how's that possible that a stranger could know absolutely anything about somebody else's family member*, for example, but this is so much the beauty of constellation work is that it gives credence – I would even go as far as to say it reveres the capacity that our bodies have to understand our connectedness, because in our minds, which most of the world... those are the parrots in the neighborhood, by the way... most of the world thinks of knowledge and time as being very linear, and it's all about distinction and separation, and I'm here and somebody else is in New York, or I'm living now and somebody lived 100 years ago, or this person is so different from me I couldn't possibly know anything about their experience. But in our bodies,

actually, which is not a linear experience, time and space do something very, very different, and we're actually able to connect immediately just through our own intention and our own willingness and openness, or capacity to connect to others. So, a lot of information can then come through people as they are representing, not just other family members, but also you can ask somebody to represent someone's addiction, for example, or somebody's first sexual encounter, or an injury they had or a symptom of some kind, or a body part. People can represent anything, and you can see how the dynamics will start to change just by introducing different elements.

**GG: It's so amazing because I've done theater my whole life and it just reminds me of so many of these exercises we would do to be able to drop into that mental space or felt space of somebody or something.**

AM: Yeah, it's a felt space. It's a good way to put it. And by the way, I think great actors, that's exactly what they're doing is they're melting the distance between them and somebody else. They're melting it and just feeling through the body what needs to be said or expressed.

**GG: I agree. So, just shifting towards addiction, I first wanted to get your working definition of addiction, so how would you define addiction? And you already mentioned this, but you could talk about what sorts of addictions you encounter in your work.**

AM: You know what, I'm a bad person to define it because I work with it so differently than how it is classically viewed.

**GG: Right.**

AM: I don't even want to embarrass myself with a classic textbook definition of addiction because it has so many different components. There can be a chemical aspect, there's... I mean, all the different things that go into a compulsivity or a lack of control... I find it's not helpful for me to work with the disease model, which is really important, and I also have a different view of, I would say, the trauma model, because certainly there's trauma behind every single addict, if not, every human I've ever worked with. We're all contending with all the traumas we've experienced that are such an integral part of our evolution. But how I view it and work with it differently is that the trauma is not just our own. So I'm not looking at the individual just as a singular person, I'm looking at somebody in terms of how, not just *they* are part of a larger system, but how their behavior, what we call addictive behavior, is functioning *for* the whole family system.

So, what I find is the people we call addicts tend to be the most sensitive people in the family, they tend to be deeply empathic, which means they feel everybody else, often times more acutely than they feel themselves, largely because they weren't allowed to have a self either because it was too dangerous to be a self or they were constantly told that who that they were – what they were expressing – was incorrect or ridiculous or whatever and they learned to survive by denying what their own experience was.

And a lot of people come from families where they are having to serve a function for their parents, for example, a lot of parents will try to get from their children what they weren't able to get from their own parents. So children learn very young what they have to, basically, supply for their parents just to stay... not just to stay alive, I should say, but also because we desperately need love. We all need love, partially so we stay alive because if somebody doesn't love us or care about us they won't necessarily feed us and clothe us and all those things, but also because we, as just beings, and not just humans... I mean, I have no doubt that animals need this as well.

But anyway, so with addiction, I'm really looking at, how is this addiction, I'll just keep calling it addiction, *how is it serving the person?* Is it trying to protect somebody? Is it trying to distance somebody? Is it trying to connect

someone? We have something in constellation work called following the dead, oftentimes there are very deep loyalties to those who have died, not just people we know we loved, but sometimes it can be to people who died tragically in our families, or they were excluded and then died tragically, or something happened, and somebody often, again, the most sensitive person in the family might take on this certain entanglement with somebody, quite unconsciously, and act out or be compelled to live certain behaviors or difficulties in their lives that may indeed be an unconscious attempt to make conscious this person that has been either forgotten, or judged in some way, or hated, or just excluded.

**GG: I take it you probably have to do a pretty thorough consultation or conversation before you actually engage-**

AM: To get the genealogy, for example?

**GG: Yeah, so that you can know which things to bring up, which things to ask the person, the patient, to embody or represent.**

AM: Yeah, yeah. That's a great question and one that I'm still grappling with myself... You know, if you have time, it can be fantastic to learn, to ask, and part of the art of doing this work is what *do* you ask? Precisely, what do you ask? Because you can just get way into the weeds really quickly with knowing all kinds of details... The most salient information can be some of the quirkiest information. Sometimes you can get that information quite quickly in some a few sentences, but sometimes you don't get a lot of time to ask questions and you have to rely on what somebody puts on the floor, or on the table, to see what is the dynamic and just go from there and do your best to help people to feel, because ultimately that's what this is about. It's not just to see and get information, it's to help people feel safe enough to feel what they've been avoiding, often through drugs or whatever the behavior is.

**GG: So, I definitely want ask you at some point, I guess I could just ask you now because it's a good segue, but what qualities about yourself do you feel make you right for this kind of work? Because it's really intense to hold space for somebody to feel things they've been avoiding for, maybe their whole life, or at least many years.**

AM: What a great question. That touches me. I have to be honest, sometimes I wonder that myself, like what am I doing working with trauma, basically, all the time? And sometimes I think I should be doing something else because it is so heavy, so I do have to make a point of balancing it, but then I also just find that, to me, there is little as exquisite as experiencing somebody go from feeling so much shame and so much marginalization in their lives to suddenly recognizing the deep beauty they have within them, and that actually all these dark things they've been doing are actually out of love and that they actually have this capacity for love and the beginning of an understanding of a capacity to be loved. As you can see, it touches me even talking about it, that I deeply value this courage that I have had to have throughout my life to keep looking at the shadows that so many people avoid through drugs, for example. Granted the people that I see are the people who, for the most part, are wanting to heal, and they're the small percentage, they're the exception. I mean, there's tons of people who want to keep doing whatever they're doing so that they don't have to face the shadows, not just their own shadows, but again, the shadows of their whole family system that have been swept under the rug and stuck in the closets and denied and avoided.

And by the way, my view of healing is also not individual, it's also systemic. I believe that anybody who heals anything for themselves is also healing it not only for their families, but also for the planet. So in other words, it's my way of serving.

**GG: It's actually such a radical way to think about addiction as serving this function within a system because it's such a blame and shame-oriented situation where you just see time and time again people being blamed for not being able to stop-**

AM: Get their shit together.

**GG: Doing whatever they're doing.**

AM: Yeah.

**GG: Yeah, when in reality it's instead understanding that they're sort of medicating themselves-**

AM: Because it's too much. What I find time and time again is that people end up carrying more than they can bear, and at some point they buckle because it's just too much.

I have to say, I want to come back to this thing about emotion because over and over again I heard people say I don't wanna feel, it's too much to feel, and certainly we live in, a lot of the world, a lot of our cultures are terrified of feeling, you can call it the feminine or you can call it whatever, but if we aren't held, very young, in a loving, contained kind of way when we're experiencing emotion... I was thinking about it this morning and I was remembering feeling such intense emotion when I was really young, like three and four, that if I weren't being held or cared for, which in my case... I remember many times not being held and cared for when I was either extremely angry, or extremely sad, or really afraid, that it would feel like my body was going to break.

Of course, when we're little children, and our nervous systems are forming, we can feel things that feel dangerous to our survival and we need to be co-regulated as infants, and so if we didn't get that, we can learn that emotions are terrifying things and that we won't survive them if we really feel grief now, or the degree of rage we can feel, or any of these strong feelings. It's just innate that it becomes innate that we think, oh my God, I can't possibly survive the intensity of my experience, largely because we also become isolated or we stay isolated.

So we get used to being isolated with what we're experiencing. Even as adults, even if our nervous system could handle what we're feeling, it can be really hard to go to the depths of our feeling without either the physical or the emotional embrace of somebody else to help us navigate and navigate that journey of whatever intensity we're feeling. So it's easier to just run away from it. You know?

**GG: Something I wanted to ask you about was... with something like AA, which asks people to really identify with being an addict, like that's how you introduce yourself, and so there's a lot of embodiment with that and asking somebody to be defined by that label, so I was wondering about the importance because it seems to me that constellation work, the whole strategy, is to externalize and to disembodiment... or, maybe not disembodiment, but to allow yourself to step back and look at all of these things from, maybe not an objective point of view, but there's just this externalization that I think is sort of key.**

AM: I want to make something clear about that though, the externalization; a large part of the point of externalizing is to actually be able to — t's a paradox — be able to truly feel, internally, what we've had to avoid. And it has this really interesting way of doing that, one, because it can be safer to see it externally, two, because they're in a group situation, there are people helping us feel what has been too overwhelming for us to feel and... and we're able to then, metabolize it in a way that we haven't been able to before. Also because it's such a body based method that the more we're in our bodies, the more we're able to process emotion and get through it to the other side. I wanted to add that, too.

But I love your question about AA because AA has obviously helped millions of people so I certainly have no interest whatsoever in criticizing it in any way, I think whatever helps people is a wonderful thing, but as you've already suspected, anything that's that static I have some problem with because we're constantly changing. Our role and, you could say, our functions in the family can also change and our systems are always changing, everybody in our system, whether it's just the family or in the planet — we're all affecting each other constantly. So having such a static identification, I have a problem with it. Just because I don't know how ultimately helpful it is. That said, I believe the point of it is to really help people to face the difficulty they're having, and help to de-stigmatize it, so, insofar as it does all those things, and I'm sure other things, positive things as well, I think that's wonderful, but it's not how I work. Because I'm, again, I'm looking through a very different lens: how is the addiction functioning and how can we find other resources to fulfill that function in constructive and positive ways rather than in destructive ways? That's really what I'm looking at.

**GG: That's a good segue to a different question I had which is... so all of these discoveries take place in the session, I would imagine, how do you help a client, or a group, integrate those discoveries into their lives afterwards? So, how do you move forward after that?**

AM: One of the biggest keys, and there's kind of a big split in the constellation field, is that a lot of practitioners will view what's happening externally as the constellation. My lineage of learning constellation work is that the constellation is actually happening, at best anyway, within the person, even if all kinds of stuff is happening on the floor. So a lot of the skill and the art is helping people move through it and actually integrate it and shift it in their own nervous system, in their own physiology, and emotionality, and psyche, and some would say soul, while the constellation is actually happening so that something changes. Unlike... I mean, don't get me wrong, I love therapy, I've gotten a lot from therapy in my life, and a lot of therapy tends to happen in my mind thereafter and I'm thinking about it a lot. Whereas in constellation work, you don't have to think about it, it's already happened. It's been done. If it's been done well, I should say, and the meaning is made whether consciously and intellectually, or in the body, there can be a sense of relief, or something unwinding, or something settling that wasn't able to settle before.

That said, we're also thinking beings. You've seen a shifting of configurations and all of a sudden you've had a deep physiological experience of what that would be like to have your mother in that example, only three feet in front of you, facing you... you go away, as one would a dream for example, and that new schema is kind of burned in your mind and your sensation. It's like, "Oh, I now know what that could be like to actually face my mother and say to her what I've needed to say," so that next time one is around one's mother, if they're still living, something comes up in the body and the sensation of that's what I need to do, to say I needed you, whether it's actually verbally said or not. Oftentimes, we see in constellation work that just the experience of watching these new configurations and feeling these new configurations can shift whole family dynamics. It's quite uncanny. It can be really something.

Sometimes other family members, either on the floor or in real life, are not willing to move, they're not willing to change, but we can reconfigure within ourselves, and sometimes that requires literally turning around and leaving the literal or figurative constellation. Sometimes it's like, "I can't get any movement here and I can't keep living. It's literally killing me to keep living with everyone's back turned to me, or somebody glomming on to me so heavily that I can't even breathe. I have to move. I have to do something to change the situation."

One of my teachers, whom I made the films about, Stephen Hausner, talks a lot about our having to come to peace with our unfulfilled longing, that all of us get something, even if it's only life, from our parents and don't get all kinds of things that we need, all of us. And that the process of maturation is to really accept and bear this unfulfilled longing. But of course, we try to fill that emptiness in others or in drugs, or whatever the addiction is. People are trying to fill this hole, they're trying to fulfill a longing that they couldn't get fulfilled by parents.

**GG: Do you think there are any blockages, physical blockages, for somebody who has an addiction to a substance when you're doing bodywork, constellation work with somebody? Is that another barrier you have to sort of push through in order to get somebody to be in that felt sense of their body?**

AM: For sure. For sure. I mean, when you're working with people who are in active detox, some people can't even focus, they're sitting there going in and out of focus... So, you can only do with somebody, whether they're an addict or not, you can only take them as far as they're willing and able to go, physiologically and again, emotionally. I think usually people are just terrified to feel, particularly addicts, so can you just slowly titrate them into feeling more? Because I do believe the only way out is through. I really do.

**GG: I agree.**

AM: I don't think we have to wallow while we're getting through, but to really effectively experience something and move on.

**GG: Do you think that somatic work, or bodywork, is an essential component of an addiction treatment plan?**

AM: Absolutely.

**GG: Yeah?**

AM: Absolutely. By the way, when you're saying bodywork that can mean lots of things because I do think Constellation Work certainly happens in the body and works with the body and honors the body in a lot of ways, but I also do hands-on bodywork and I think that's essential because the body just gets clogged up with so much crap – stress, and constriction, and misalignment, physically and otherwise, that it keeps that stuck identification, and I think change becomes that much more difficult to make if the body isn't being renewed, and restored, and resuscitated, and re-felt.

**GG: Clogged up is such a visceral description that's very resonant. I think we've all experienced that.**

AM: You had said something earlier too that's really important is so many of us have a really hard time even being in our bodies, which means feeling our bodies and, boy, most addicts, even sex addicts who are doing all kinds of things with their bodies, they're barely feeling them a lot of the time. Sometimes they're not or sometimes the only way they can feel their body at all is through their genitals, so I think this is a huge component coming back to your previous question, is anything that's helping people regain or gain for the first time a sense of safety and positive experience to feel their bodies is a good thing.

**GG: I have a question about our understanding of addiction at large and how we can all expand that understanding to include things that are less obvious than, say, substance abuse, so how can we all turn the mirror on ourselves and wonder what kind of addictive tendencies we might be engaging in.**

AM: Well, I'm going to use myself as an example because I'm dealing with that a lot right now, and this could sound so absurd, but it really doesn't matter what the substance or the focus is, but I'm really dealing with this with ice cream right now, which takes on all the more meaning because my mother passed away five months ago and so the mother is very much about cream and milk and nourishment, and so a draw to dairy can be very much a draw, or a longing, or a need of the mother. And so this has really been a big one for me lately is, whether it's missing my mother now or recapitulating my original missing of her because of her unavailability in ways when I was young.

Again, it can sound so trivial that I'm talking about ice cream, but it's really causing disturbance in my life and it's really expressing some disturbance in my life of wanting more sweetness in my life, wanting more of just that sensual experience of goodness and...

**GG: Comfort.**

AM: And comfort. Obviously, comfort eating is a very well-known phenomenon, but I, on a daily basis, am having to go find the courage in myself, and I'm not very good at it a lot of the time, is can I slow it down? So, as soon as the idea comes, let's go to the store and buy this, and this happens in addicts, like trying to support them to slow it down, pick up the phone before you want to go and buy a fix of some kind. I'm doing the same thing in a sense of like, "Oh, slow it down. What is it really? Is it really that I need to sob for a few minutes, or that I need to pick up the phone and contact a friend because I'm needing some nourishment here that I'm not finding within myself? Or, is there a way to find it in myself in some other way? Am I just feeling unloved? Am I feeling alone or abandoned? What is the feeling that's really inside of this?"

**GG: For somebody who has never heard of constellation work, this is their first time being introduced to it and maybe they don't have access to a facilitator where they live, where they happen to live, how can they translate the practice, or the work, or the modality, and try to maybe engage in some of it on their own?**

AM: That's a great question, and the good news is, is that there are more and more facilitators as we speak. It's really catching on in the US. I made these films about the work, so that's one thing I would say is you could go to my website, [www.constellationarts.com](http://www.constellationarts.com), and check out these films, even though they're specifically about working with illness. But there are more and more groups, there's workshops going on, not a far flight from anybody at this point in the states. It's much bigger in other countries all over the world, so in South America it's huge, Europe, it's huge, Russia, it's getting more and more, it's really all over. I've sold these films on six continents so it's a method that's really becoming known and certainly, people can contact me and I can help. You can do the work over Skype as well. Obviously, individual sessions are more expensive than going to a group, but there are groups around, and it's life-changing.

I know for myself, one of the biggest benefits that I gained, not just because of the help it gave me with my family, but it gave me a sense of confidence in my own capacity to connect to what I experience is truth because you can feel it in your body. Bodies are brilliant, they know exactly how things feel in relationship to each other and ourselves. The body is just a treasure trove of information. That is apparently my mission to help more of the world know and experience.

I think what I would like to do, if it's okay, is just to suggest to listeners to try it themselves. You can do it with Post-its on a table, by the way, or pieces of paper, I like that because then if you step on them sometimes you just go and you just feel your body. It is that simple. It's not fancy stuff. So, if you take a piece of paper and you just write yourself on it, or your name, take the piece of paper for your mother, your father, if you want to do mother or father, you could just take a piece of paper and write ice cream on it, or your drug of choice, or porn, or whatever it is that... if you're struggling with something. And you put an arrow to be the direction it's facing. This is really important because if you're facing towards something or away from something, you got to see the direction these things are facing, and you put them down on the floor and you see ...

**GG: Oh my gosh, is it raining?**

AM: It's raining!

**GG: How did that happen! Okay so, continue...**

AM: Okay, so if you just put them down on the floor, make sure that you see, obviously, where the arrows are facing, and it is so amazing to see is, for example, I'm going to keep using this goofy but true example, is ice cream standing behind your mat, is it trying to support you from behind? Is it smack in front of you, staring you in the face? Is it looking away? Is it coming between you and your parents? Because I see this a lot: the addiction will be trying to get space between a parent that is appropriating the child for something, trying to get something from the child that the child inherently knows is inappropriate.

And then, stand on each one and see how does it feel to be standing behind, or in front of, or beside looking in, or turned away, and it's just a preliminary experience but you can get some really quite stunning insights from it.

And then bring in a positive thing, bring in, I don't know, exercise, or your animal, or a lover, or somebody who's positive in your life, and make a paper for them and then place them where it would feel better and see if that changes anything. You can just try all kinds of things. So that's a cheap... a free way to start to explore.

**GG: Well, I think that's so important is to just give people these tools to be able to at least try themselves, so thank you for outlining that. This has been an amazing conversation.**

AM: I'm so glad. It's been a pleasure. I love talking about this stuff.

**GG: Yeah, so thank you so much.**

AM: My pleasure.