

**Sarah Schulman:** Unfortunately, the current situation is that conflict is often overstated and abuse remains invisible.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Sarah Schulman, and this is, Well That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, a conversation with Sarah Schulman. She's an award-winning novelist and playwright, an activist, and an academic. She joins us to talk about the ideas in her book *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

**Jes Rau:** Hey there, Sam.

**Sam Fuqua:** Really excited to be talking with Sarah Schulman. Good morning, Sarah.

**Sarah Schulman:** Hi.

**Jes Rau:** Thanks, Sarah. We're excited for you to be with us. I'm not sure how many of our listeners have been able to take a look at your book or have heard of your book, so I'm just wondering if you might be willing to introduce, um, your book and your work around conflict and abuse.

**Sarah Schulman:** Sure. So my book is called *Conflict is Not Abuse*. It was written in 2014 and it was published in 2016 before Trump was elected. Uh, but I have to say, I think that Trump's time in office really proved, uh, my point, but we'll get to that in a minute. So what I'm looking at is how people in power position themselves as victims in order to avoid accountability. And I'm looking at the full continuum of that. From Trump saying, "It's a witch hunt. I really won the election. I'm the victim." You know, that sort of rhetoric, all the way down to personal, interpersonal relationships. And so, um, in 2014, when I finished the book, I juxtaposed three events. The first was Ray Rice who was a football player who was photographed knocking his wife unconscious in an elevator. So it was a personal, intimate relationship. Um, the second was the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. Two black men who were murdered by the police. And the third event was the Israeli aerial war on Gaza in 2014, in which thousands of civilians were murdered.

So there I saw that from the intimate relationship to the government's relationship with the people to geopolitical dynamics, we saw the same, uh, trope, which was gross overreaction and the repositioning of people who are actually endangered, as dangerous. The pretense the police have that black men are dangerous to them, so the police shoot them and kill them with a, with this concept of themselves being threatened when actually they're the perpetrators. The rhetoric of the Israeli state when they are depriving Palestinians of all basic rights and occupying their land, and yet positioning themselves as constantly under threat when they are the perpetrators. And in personal, intimate relationships in which some kind of opposition or difference becomes constituted as abuse or attack, and then a person escalates and responds with grotesque overstatement. So that was, those were the parameters. And then of course, Trump came to power and it all came to be in front of everyone's eyes. So we had, blame was placed on immigrants who were the least powerful people in the country. And, um, there was this positioning of white people as being under threat or under attack simply because white supremacy was being questioned.

So throughout all this study, what I observed is that there are basically two different positions from which people misinterpret opposition or difference as threat. One is dominance and the other is from trauma. So people who are raised from a dominant position grow up to believe that they should never have to question themselves. And if someone opposes them or has a different, or is different than them, they feel a discomfort at the idea of having to be self-critical. And they see that discomfort as an attack. But similarly, when we're traumatized, sometimes it's so hard to just keep it together, that being in the presence of difference or opposition and having to question ourselves becomes so overwhelming because our selves are so fragile that we feel that we're being abused or under attack, when we're really just facing difference. So just to, to end the summary, I give pretty clear definitions of conflict and abuse. Abuse is power over. It's when no matter what you do, you are gonna be subjugated to this power. So, for example, systemic racism or Islamophobia or antisemitism. Systemic oppressions where the individual has no ability to stop it and the individual doesn't cause it. That is abuse. But conflict, which is what the book is about, is power struggle. It's when two parties both participate in escalation. It doesn't mean that they contribute equally, and it doesn't mean that they experience it equally, but they're both participating in some kind of power struggle that escalates the problem. So that, that's sort of the summary of, of the book.

**Jes Rau:** Something that I really liked was how you did take that from the interpersonal all the way to the, the global, um, looking at these larger issues. And one of the things that struck me when I was looking at the book was how you talked about if we can't figure out how to, um, deal with conflict with friends, how can we do that on that big global level that actually it's really important, that we learn how to do this on the interpersonal level in order to also be able to do this on the global level. Can you just talk about that a little bit, the, the importance and the link?

**Sarah Schulman:** We're at a cultural moment of enormous, uh, overstatement. And in many, many realms, when somebody is different or presents some kind of opposition, there is a desire to remove them, to silence them, to um, separate them in some way. I use the word shunning. And the group can be a family, it can be a clique, it can be a religion, it can be a nation state. But, um, what we're seeing is that the root of that is this very distorted concept of loyalty, where people feel that to be a good friend or to be a good family member or to be a good American or a good Jew, what you're supposed to do is bond with the people with whom you identify and hate or, or shun or blame the people with whom they're in conflict. And this is our definition of loyalty. And I'm proposing instead that a true friend or a true colleague is a person who helps the people with whom they identify, negotiate. That we should be expecting people to negotiate with our support. And what I see is at the root of this is that right now the only way that a person is eligible for compassion is if they are entirely pure and clean in their victimization. So, that, for this reason people overstate their cleanliness and they overstate the harm so that they could become eligible for compassion. Because now if you admit that you've participated in escalating something or you've overstated harm, you lose the support of your group because they're reliant on a supremacy idea of themselves as clean. But, if we could instead encourage people to be self-critical and praise people for being, for taking responsibility for their participation instead of blaming them, then we could have a much more nuanced and complex concept of how to move towards repair.

**Sam Fuqua:** Can I ask you, Sarah Schulman, to maybe see how you would apply that to a personal friendship situation?

**Sarah Schulman:** For example, we're very often asked to hurt people. Like you'll constantly hear like, oh, I broke up with my boyfriend, don't invite him to the party. Why are you talking to that person? Why are you working with her? You know, we're always being asked to justify our loyalties by hurting a third party. I'm proposing instead that when we're asked to hurt somebody, we, we talk to that person, the object of the

hostility, and ask them, why do you think this is happening? Because when you ask somebody who's been made a hostile object, why do you think this is happening, you learn so much about the experience. And that's why often voices, entire voices are kept out of the media. For example, as someone, I'm a member, I'm on the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace, which is the largest Jewish pro-Palestinian organization in the United States. We have 18,000 members. And, um, we've taken the position that Palestinians' voices need to be heard. And when you look at the American media, they're completely absent. So the person who's being blamed or the group that's being stigmatized, that's the voice that's most important to have heard.

**Sam Fuqua:** Related to your work with Jewish Voices for Peace, uh, a label that is sometimes put on Jewish Americans, and my wife is one of them, uh, who are trying to work for peace and speak out against the actions of the Israeli government, they're called self-hating Jews. What is that about?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, that's this idea that you're supposed to be "loyal" to the group that you're connected to biologically or socially regardless of what the reality is of their behavior, you know. And I mean, in, in the case of the Jewish diaspora being expected to support everything that the Israeli government does, this is really rooted in family. It's because people have relatives in Israel or we're all somewhat connected that way, and there's this idea that loyalty to the family is paramount. But we know that a lot of injustice takes place in families. I wrote a book on familial homophobia, for example, which is most people's first experience of homophobia is in the family. Or we know about domestic violence and we know about sexual abuse within the family. The family can be a very dangerous entity. So you know, simply because you're identified or connected to a group, it doesn't, means that you really should be dynamic with that group about being self-critical, not being just blindly loyal, 'cause it has international justice re, implications.

**Jes Rau:** So something else that you talk about is the community responsibility. And some of the examples that you give of our relinquishing of responsibility is when we hand over the responsibility of figuring out conflicts or deciding what happens, um, in a situation, to the police. Um, can you just share a little bit more about your views on the community responsibility element?

**Sarah Schulman:** Sure. Well, you know, um, police officer in the United States is the profession with the highest rate of domestic violence of any job, including NFL player. So what we know from that is that American police officers are the people who are least likely to be able to solve a problem, and yet people call them to come in to problems that they have no ability to repair. So that we often are hearing stories of a man's having a fight with his son. His son has a drug problem or has a mental health problem. They call the police, and the police end up killing the son. I mean, we, we, we see, we see that the police are constantly a force of escalation, you know. And yet, there's this way that if you call the police, you feel that you're positioned as the person who's being victimized and automatically gives you the legitimacy because you've called the police. Now, I quote extensively from the work of Catherine House, who is a social worker with a long history in domestic violence movement, and she shows how tools that have been established to aid people who are victims of domestic violence are often seized by the perpetrator. In fact, increasingly, the perpetrator is the first to call the police or to ask for a restraining order or, um, to, to file a complaint, because they're using those tools to label themselves as the victim. And this is the same paradigm that we've been talking about with Trump, with the Israeli state, with the abuse of partner, that in our moment, being asserting oneself as the victim is the thing that, that brings legitimacy.

So instead of calling the police, I mean, people are looking for lots of alternatives, right? So the first thing is to try to ask the community to be helpful. But for people who are interested in defunding or restructuring

the concept of police in the United States, they're, they're looking for a lot more support for people. Abolition activists are saying let's not call the police when there's a drug problem. We need an entire sector of society that, to support people with addictions. Let's not call the police when there's a mental health problem. We should be able to call people who are trained and compassionate and knowing about how to deescalate problems with mental health. Right now we're asking the police really to come in as punishment and I, and I want to talk about punishment a little bit 'cause I think it's a bit at the root of this. I think right now we believe, we only believe that we're being heard in our complaint if the person that we blame for our pain is being punished. We see these two things as completely intertwined. If the person we blame is not being punished, we feel that we're not being heard. But my experience of my life, I'm 62 year old person, is that I don't think punishment has ever worked. I don't know any examples of punishment working, you know. And if we could separate this need to be heard and supported and helped from demanding that another person lose their rights or be punished, if we could see these as two separate entities, I think we could go forward in a very different way. So that when people ask for help, they can get it without having to justify why they need it.

**Sam Fuqua:** I was thinking of that, uh, incident a while back where a, a black man was walking in Central Park and came upon a white woman who had her dog off leash. He asked her to simply leash the dog and follow the park rules, and she immediately went into, I, I think a victim response and, you know, was calling the police and claiming danger in a, a way that really illustrates some of what you've been talking about. And, you know, clearly wanted punishment for this man who simply wanted her to leash her dog and follow the rules of the park.

**Sarah Schulman:** That's right. And she risked his life because we know that the police kill black men. And what's very interesting about that case is that it really brings into question some of the slogans that we've been working with for some time, such as "Believe Women," for example, which is a very, very complicated concept because on one hand, women have not been believed systemically when they've told the truth, and women still aren't believed. And yet if you're saying "Believe Women," you also have to deal with the fact that white women have privileges and powers that, for example, men of color don't have. So when it, when it's a question of racial difference, in this case, and this has been historically true, you can't just believe women because sometimes there's other social powers at play. And so it really makes us have to be more complicated and nuanced and look at every situation with specificity.

**Jes Rau:** Before we move on to duty of repair, is there anything else that you would wanna talk about within community responsibility?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, I just think that, you know, we have to think about who's actually endangered, because right now people who are endangered are positioned as dangerous. So we have the largest refugee band of refugees we've ever had in the world, and no one will take them in. We have incredible homelessness all over our country, and no solution. People who really deserve and need enormous amount of social aid are being policed, punished, and, and positioned as the threat when they are actually the victims of the system. So we need a real reversal of accountable, accountability.

**Jes Rau:** So in terms of the duty of repair, um, something that I really enjoyed also that you said is that any harm that people can create is also harm that we can transcend. Um, so what do we do? How do we do that? And what is the vision of doing things in a different way?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, I think that the end goal is this thing that I call "agreement," which doesn't mean that you agree on the, on what is happening or what it means, but that you agree on what each other think



and feel. So if I can accurately describe your perspective in a way that you can recognize, and you can accurately describe my perspective in a way that I can recognize, that's pretty far. And I think we can end it there. That we've both been heard and our simultaneous realities are on the table as equally recognized. And in order to get there, people have, need the support of the groups that they're in to negotiate and to be self-critical, and to not be blamed by the people who identify with them when they are self-critical. So if someone comes to you and says, "Um, oh, I broke up with my girlfriend. I, I don't want you to ever talk to her again. And she can never come to any of our things again. And we have to block her." You know, it's the responsibility of the group to say, "Whoa, wait a minute!" You know, what happened? What was your participation? How does she feel? Let's talk to her. What does she think? Let's negotiate something that's humane and, and makes sense. So that's, that's on the intimate. And then on the social, when we have people saying we, we have to separate families at the border and these children should be incarcerated, you know, very high levels of, uh, inflicting of pain and punishment that will have long term consequences, it's up to us as a group, as Americans, to say no, that is not what we're going to do. You know, we have to change the way that we're operating here. So it's the same procedure from the, the most intimate relationships to the geopolitical.

**Jes Rau:** So if they're sharing these two realities and both sides can kind of articulate those for one another, if one is rooted in that supremacy idea and can't, there's no movement from that, um, so for example, if it's a person who holds white supremacist ideas talking with someone who's a person of color, is the expectation that the person of color accept those things or recognize those things? What's the expectation in a situation like that?

**Sarah Schulman:** No, the expectation is the, is that the other white people in that person's life have the responsibility to talk to them. I mean, for example, let's go back to Israel-Palestine politics. So in Palestinian politics, there's this concept of avoiding normalization. The Palestinians should not have to be put in a position where they're debating with Zionists about whether or not they have the right, same right to autonomy as any other human being, you know, because it's, it's demeaning and, and normalizes the, a state of debate that is not productive. However, as a Jewish person myself, it's my responsibility to talk to other Jewish people about these issues and try to move the community forward. You know, it's not on the person who's being oppressed alone. And this is what solidarity politics is all about, right? So if you have someone in your job or who's in your, our government who's a white supremacist, then it's our responsibility to join with others to, to remove them, to disarm them, to dismantle their power. And I think a lot of Americans have, are trying to rise to that right now.

**Sam Fuqua:** Coming back to white supremacists, is a white supremacist someone who I should be compassionate towards? Do they deserve my support or understanding in some way?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, it depends on who they are and what's going on, you know. If a person is dealing with an addiction, then they need support to address that. If a, you know, there's, there's, 'cause people are complex on all kinds of levels, right? And there's a huge amount of people in this country who are very delusional right now. They know that something is wrong and something is wrong in their lives, but they've created non-existent entities to blame for their problems. And so there's a, you know, obviously ignoring them or simply opposing them has not just worked, that's not worked. So, you know, we need to gain more power. For, for example, this, what's going on in Georgia. The desire of the Georgia Republicans to try to keep black people from voting, and the responsibility of all of the rest of us in the country to be, to do everything we can to stop that from happening. You know, we have to address it directly.

**Jes Rau:** So in terms of, um, duty of repair, uh, as the next kind of concept within the overall concept, where does that leave us? What do we do and how do we do it?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, I think it's the same principle, which is to allow the object to speak. So if you, let's start in the intimate realm. If someone says to you, I, my husband is a monster and I don't want you to ever talk to him again. I mean, the first thing that you do is call him and ask him, you know, why do you think this is happening? And you'll, you have to make decisions based on information, but you have to talk to people and hear how they feel before you decide to hurt them or to collectively shun them or deprive them of their presence. Um, when it's a geopolitical issue, then we join together. We have solidarity politics or big tent politics where there's rooms for lots of different movements with different agendas, but whose work resonates with each other, just as we saw on the streets this summer with all different kinds of people marching together in the street. But it's the same principle of allowing the person or group of people that are being demonized to be heard. That's the starting point.

**Sam Fuqua:** Do you have an example from your own life about how you have been able to do that, particularly with someone who, you know, you just were really at odds with or thought was in a completely different place?

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, in my book, I give a lot of examples, but one was, um, about 20 years ago, I had a student who, I suddenly discovered had a blog about how he was in love with me and he wanted to have sex with me and all this kind of thing, and I was very shocked by this. And I told my colleagues and they said, "Oh, he's stalking you. You should go to the administration." And in this moment, it was tempting because I saw that my colleagues were constituting me as a victim. And they were constituting this student as a perpetrator and he was stalking me, which is one of those words like, he's abusive, he's a stalker. These are words that are overused very, that have very specific, real meanings and are overused to generalize. And it bothered me that I was being invited to be wrapped into the warmth of their support of my victimization. But nobody said why don't you ask him why, what he thinks is, do, is going on, or why he thinks this is happening. And I could have gone to the authorities and had him branded a stalker because once you're accused, I mean anyone can be accused of anything. And when someone's accused of something, all you know is that they've been accused. And this is very accusatory time. I could have destroyed him if I had done that. So instead I called him and I said, "Listen, you know, you made me really uncomfortable, and I can't be your advisor anymore, and I'm transferring you to somebody else."

I didn't play one of these games like, you have five minutes, or I'm only gonna discuss this with you once. Like, I didn't do one of those childish things. I was like we can talk about this as much as we need to, and you know, until the transition is completed. And so we talked three times about it. And what I learned was, I learned a couple of things. One thing I learned was this was in the early days of blogs and all of that, and I learned that younger people were used to writing intimate experiences online and that people my age had not yet gotten used to that. So it wasn't unusual. So that was interesting. And I also learned that he had come from a very, very oppressed group, and it was really one of the first times that he'd gotten encouragement to be a writer on his own terms. And so, you know, he had gotten over-involved with his teacher, which happens quite a bit with writing teachers. So, you know, once we kind of broke it all down and, and I, there was no punishment, um, and I didn't play a game of how victimized I was then, you know, it all worked out fine and I, I was very glad for that because it's very, very easy to overstate harm. It's very easy to claim that the harm that's been done to you because you're a bit uncomfortable is, is deep and long lasting when actually it's just discomfort. And as Sara Ahmed, one of my favorite writers, has pointed out, "The only way to ever be comfortable all the time is if other people are suppressed." If you're living in a

state of true dynamic difference, you're, you will always be uncomfortable and there's something very, very positive in that. You know, only very, very dominant people demand the right to never be uncomfortable.

**Jes Rau:** For me, I think a couple of the things that stood out, um, as kind of, uh, the end, wrap up, that really stuck out for me were really examining when are we dis, uncomfortable? When are we experiencing discomfort? And when are we actually experiencing, um, abuse or harm? And then this idea that we're underreacting to abuse and overreacting to that conflict piece. Um, those were two of the, the core things that stuck out for me. And so just wondering if you have any closing ideas or thoughts around that or any of the other elements, um, that you'd like to share with our listeners.

**Sarah Schulman:** Well, I think that that's a good place to end is that we're in a world where people who are truly being abused are not getting any help or support, and that can be as pe, a lot of the people that we've talked about, refugees, occupied people, homeless people, migrants, you know, they're positioned as a threat and they don't get the support that they need. And people who are constantly calling abuse are all, sometimes are the perpetrators themselves, whether it's false racist claims about Islamic or, uh, black threat or Arab threat that don't exist or claims that elections were stolen when they weren't. And, you know, the, the dominant person who can't bear to question themselves or be, uh, self-critical. So yes, unfortunately the current situation is that conflict is often overstated, and abuse is re, remains invisible.

**Sam Fuqua:** Sarah Schulman is an artist, activist, and academic. Her 2016 book is called, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*.

Our podcast is called, Well That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts and on our website, [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with the Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at [conflictcenter.org](http://conflictcenter.org).