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Stand Your Ground Without Fighting

This is Episode number 69 of Stay Happily Married, "Stand Your Ground Without Fighting."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We are going to talk about how to stand your ground without fighting, really about learning to be assertive and stand up for yourself. Our guest today is marriage and family therapist Liza Shaw.

Liza is a certified advanced clinical hypnotherapist. She's a licensed marriage and family therapist. She's got two young children. We're going to be speaking to her from Hickory, North Carolina.

Before we jump in, though, let me suggest to you that if you're listening to this at your computer -- and I know at least some of you are -- what I like to do and what might be helpful to you is to pop up Liza's website on your screen while you're listening to us. Open another tab, another window. She's at PowerToThrive.com and there's a link right here in the show notes that you can check out.

Now, this is a chance for you to learn how to have a discussion, to have a conversation, that doesn't have to be an argument, where you can really get what you want without having it turn into a knockdown drag out way of getting what you want. I found it very, very helpful to hear what Liza has to say. So let's jump right in.

Welcome to the show, Liza.

Liza Shaw:

Thank you very much.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad you could join us today. You know, sometimes one spouse will have a communication style that just doesn't match up with the other spouse and they just can't -- I don't know, they don't connect, they don't communicate well. Things just in the blink of an eye turn from a conversation to an argument or a relationship -- I mean, from a conversation to an argument.

And what I'm wondering, I know you're sort of the expert on this idea of being more assertive and not being so passive and all that. What I'm wondering is if you could give us sort of a quick rundown on what sort of passive behaviors look like in the context of a marriage. When somebody's just one of those passive people, what does that -- what do you see when you see that going on in a relationship?

Liza Shaw: Well, passive communication is usually motivated by fear, fear of not being accepted or being made wrong, being told that they're bad or that they don't fit in, or essentially that their feelings or their rights are not important. And so I think generally to start with people who have passive communication styles are already operating on some of those ideas or those fears, that they might be true. And so that's what kind of motivates them not to express their feelings or their needs and they're acting on these ideas that perhaps they aren't as important as others or that they don't have anything to contribute to a conversation or that the other person's contribution somehow matters more.

Lee Rosen: When you say fear, fear of what? What are we talking about?

Liza Shaw: Fear of -- it could be anything from their low self-esteem -- fear that they might be found out that they are not worthy or that what they have to say really is not important, or fear that they won't get what they want. I think a lot of times it's sort of almost like an inevitable vicious cycle or a self-fulfilling prophecy where they start out afraid that they aren't going to get what they want so they might as well not bother trying.

And so they stay quiet and then they stuff their feelings or their -- they push down their emotion and try to repress it, but it doesn't stay repressed all that long. There really is something else in them telling them that their feelings and their needs and beliefs are important and eventually that can turn into -- they'll actually try to express that in ways that come across aggressive. It's really kind of the reaction of their passive behavior.

Lee Rosen: Well, what about if we flip the coin to the other side and we have a spouse that is just all about being aggressive? How does that person approach the marriage?

Liza Shaw: Well, that person will generally be forceful in expressing their opinions. They operate mostly out of anger or resentment. They come across pretty negative; you can hear it dripping out of people's comments when they're angry. Or they're kind of operating on the idea that their needs are more important than others or they're more right than other people, more accurate or correct about the world, and that they see the world through the lens of only their perspective and they disregard or disrespect the needs of other people.

And it's not a conscious thing. So I want to make sure that that's clear. People aren't walking around who have aggressive communication saying to themselves in their own heads, "I'm more important than everybody else." So it's hard to recognize that you might have this.

We all really have kind of parts of all of these kind of communication styles from time to time but there's a hostility or kind of a demanding inappropriate way that people tend to express their emotions when they're being aggressive. They often impose their own belief systems and values onto others and disagree with someone who disagrees with them. In other words, it's kind of not okay for people with aggressive communication patterns to have someone disagree with them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes a lot of sense. I would assume that you end up with a lot of marriages where one spouse is more passive, one is more aggressive. That almost seems like a recipe for disaster if you're both at one extreme or the other. Am I thinking right?

Liza Shaw: Yes. Oh, absolutely. It's definitely a recipe for major problems and it probably is the big contributing factor of divorce in our country. And it's funny because it's sort of a paradox. On one hand it doesn't match -- it seems like it doesn't match that one person's passive, one person's aggressive. But really if you think about it, there is a very dysfunctional balance that gets created where people kind of oscillate back and forth between not expressing their needs, not saying what they want or need that they're not getting; and then when they're like a pressure cooker, eventually they just explode.

The more passive of the two people in a relationship may explode but it doesn't look like an outward explosion because their

explosion may be more like sarcasm or kind of cutting somebody at the knees in front of other people, metaphorically speaking.

But the dysfunctional patterns tend to look like possibly emotional or physical battering. Other times it can be both partners are passive and there's a lot of withdrawing, kind of acting as though nothing's really important to fight about. And it seems like that couple might not ever actually be fighting but really they're just not taking a stand for anything or asking for anything.

Lee Rosen: Right. So being out of balance in any direction I guess is really going to result in things just not going very well.

Liza Shaw: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Interesting. Now, at some point I think -- like, for me, I probably go from sometimes being more passive about life in general and sometimes being more aggressive about life in general, just sort of depending on the situation and what's going on with me. Do you feel like people are usually more -- are we sort of permanently one way or the other or do we change as the situation changes?

Liza Shaw: I think we change as the situation changes, but everybody probably has a style that works better for them, that they kind of -- you kind of find a way where you get results in your life. So some people may end up -- the classic example would be like in a battering relationship where you've got the passive wife and you've got the aggressive husband. And so the wife may appear to be the one who is quieter, who's just kind of smoothing things over and walking on eggshells trying to keep the peace, and eventually when things blow the husband's the one who is explosive and violent.

But there are also -- it's funny because you're right. We all have a little bit of this in us. Even in really not totally dysfunctional relationships people tend to oscillate and be more passive in certain situations or more aggressive in other situations. The problem is that couples that get into self-fulfilling the whole vicious cycle pattern is where you'll find -- that's where they end up hopefully in my office before they end up in yours.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: But it's almost like a snake that's eating its own tail. And the more tail it has to eat, the bigger it grows. And the bigger it grows, the more tail it has. The more you stuff your feelings and deny that there's a truth that you're not telling about yourself or about a

circumstance in your marriage, the more that will bother you and it will kind of come back to haunt you in the relationship.

And then the worst part about it is that if that's occurring then eventually when that explodes or becomes aggressive at that point, the other party has no idea and then has the perfect justification for having discounted or disregarded the other person's feelings because the other person hasn't required their feelings to be important in the relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. At least for me, I probably -- and I'm pretty much a sort of black and white thinker, unfortunately, but I do sort of see kind of a choice between being passive or being aggressive. And there's sort of like one way or the other and it doesn't feel like there's much of a way to reconcile those two things. Why is that so hard to see?

Liza Shaw: I think that we have not necessarily in our culture -- maybe even in the world -- been given good role modeling for healthy communication styles. And if we don't know how to do something then we're just going to do what we do know how to do. Sometimes I'll use the example with clients about -- I'll just ask them the question, "So why don't you speak Swahili?" And some people don't even know what that word means, which makes my point even better. I say, "Oh, you don't know what Swahili is?" Well, it's a language that a tribe speaks; I believe it's an African tribe.

But the point is why don't you speak it, is that no one has ever taught you. and so if we don't know anything except the two extremes of passive communication or aggressive communication, that's all we're going to do. And it's hard to reconcile because both of them are flawed. They're flawed because they're based on some faulty ideas.

There are some great books -- and I've actually seen on your website that you recommend some of them -- that talk about kind of what are the components that make up highly effective, thriving marriages. And neither passive communication nor aggressive communication makes up thriving and highly effective marriages. The faulty communication styles of passiveness and aggressiveness always are dishonest and they're always fear driven and that will never lead to anything healthy.

Lee Rosen: Well, I guess if you're always being sort of on the offense or on the defense if you're --

Liza Shaw: Yeah.

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Lee Rosen: Yeah. So what's the middle ground? What do you teach people?

Liza Shaw: I teach people how to be assertive.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So help with what does that mean? I struggle with the difference between the word "assertive" and the word "aggressive."

Liza Shaw: Right.

Lee Rosen: Fill me in. What does assertive really mean?

Liza Shaw: Sure. Well, it's sort of like the idea of being proactive rather than reactive. Assertive people are able to say what they mean and mean what they say. But you don't have to be mean when you say it.

Lee Rosen: Well, what fun would that be?

Liza Shaw: Right. Aggressive people come across as mean to the people they're communicating with and they find themselves often in conflicts. Whereas a person who allows someone to disagree with them because they know that that other person's opinion does matter, then there's a dialogue; it's not necessarily a conflict. There's a mutual respect and there's a balance between the fulfillment of their own needs and the other person's needs.

Lee Rosen: Right. That just -- for me, anyway, in my life, that contrast between being aggressive and being assertive is so clear in my relationship with my teenager.

Liza Shaw: Oh, yes.

Lee Rosen: And it is -- when you go aggressive -- when you shift out of assertive and go to aggressive it just -- the whole conversation just turns into an ugly nightmare.

Liza Shaw: Yeah. It turns into a power struggle.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: Everybody then has to win instead of being literally a conversation. It turns into a contest.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. And when that happens with your spouse your marriage is just going to suffer big time and you're going to cause damage. I mean, there's just no way around it.

Liza Shaw: Yeah. It's toxic to a marriage. And I have to tell you, I'm so excited to see that you do this show and that you encourage people on your website to get to a marriage therapist before they consider divorce because there are so many divorces in our country that probably could not happen, could actually be avoided if people could learn some of these basic skills that they did not learn growing up. Just because they don't know it doesn't mean they can't learn it.

Lee Rosen: Well, and what happens is you either learn it now or you learn it in the next marriage.

Liza Shaw: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: So you might as well learn it now.

Liza Shaw: That's what I tell clients.

Lee Rosen: What is the first step that you need to take to break that pattern of always having that offensive or defensive reaction to every situation? How do you get out of that mode?

Liza Shaw: Well, I think of course the first step to any problem is to recognize that it is a problem. And most of the time -- I don't often have people coming to me sitting down and saying, "Okay, Liza. I'm here to save my marriage and I'm ready to look at all of the places that I have contributed to the downfall of this marriage."

And most people are coming in and they're pointing the finger over there at the other person saying, "They're the problem; they're the reason why we're here. And you need to change and fix them. And when you do that, everything's going to be better."

So the biggest challenge to my job -- and really it's not to my job; it's to their job to save their marriage -- is to stop pointing the finger out there and turn it back towards themselves. Because when we're only looking at someone else as the problem or an external force as the problem we have to -- there's nothing I can do to fix that. And then it just will grow and grow and grow.

And like how I described the snake eating its own tail, each person will actually use the other person's behavior as the justification or the alibi for their own. Then neither one has any incentive to make changes, which means that the changes will not occur; the problem grows.

And the defensive and offensive behavior communication style is actually a trap and it only exists when the rules of the game

underlying the conversations are about winning and losing, are about right and wrong and good and bad, and that will not -- that's a toxic environment for any kind of a relationship but especially a marriage.

Lee Rosen: So first step, stand up in front of the room and say, "I'm Lee and I'm too aggressive."

Liza Shaw: Right. "I'm Lee and I'm the problem."

Lee Rosen: Exactly. Good. Well, let me ask you this. Now, you do something. Your model you call power to thrive therapy. Fill me in on what that's all about.

Liza Shaw: Sure. Well, I've been doing this work for about 10 years now and I am a licensed marriage and family therapist. And marriage and family therapy is really kind of a different animal from other counseling modalities. It's based on something called systems theory. And systems theory actually comes out of cybernetics, which is an old system of -- basically the science of machines and systems.

And so we look at a problem within the context of the system that it lives in. So what I mean by that is even if one person sits in the room with me I am aware that this person comes from a system, from a family, from a family of origin. And all of the rules and the communication styles -- good or bad -- that they took from their family of origin are walking in the room with them. That they've been living in a family marriage -- nuclear family -- and all of -- even if that person's spouse is not there, I am aware of the spousal communication styles and patterns even if they're not there.

So it's just a little bit of a unique -- it's very much, actually, a unique take on how to work with people. And I happen to be biased and think that it's the way that works best for marriage counseling.

I've kind of taken a bunch of different models that come out of the marriage and family therapy school, or the theoretical models, and I've combined them together to create a form of therapy that really seems to work with most people that I work with. It has a process that kind of allows people to redefine the problem and own the problem more than when they're pointing the finger out at their spouse.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. Yeah. So give me a feel for what does that look like in practice. How long do you take with the typical person? How does it -- what are they sort of working through?

Liza Shaw:

Well, I can give you an overview of kind of the process. We never quite can predict how long it'll take. It really depends on how hard the clients are willing to work and also how deep-seeded the problems are. If I'm working with a couple that's been married 30 years and doing the same thing, it can sometimes take a little bit more work than a premarital couple who are just starting to run into some of these vicious cycles. But I'll go through the steps.

Essentially the first part of the process is to help the clients redefine the problem. A lot of times the client will come in and think that the problem is money, that "my spouse spends too much money." Or the other one will say, "Well, no, my spouse controls my use of the money."

In that example the problem isn't actually the money; it's more about the context that they are living inside of in their marriage. So I described before like winning and losing, right and wrong. There can only be one right; that means the other has to be wrong.

So I help clients to redefine -- to kind of look at the context that they have been living in in their marriage, or the themes of their marriage. And sometimes that has to involve looking back at their own families and how they grew up and what kind of patterns they might be carrying from their families of origin. We might even go back into those childhood memories and times when each one of them developed their paradigm or their context for what it means to be married or how to solve conflict.

And then at that -- when we move into the next phase what I like to do is distinguish for clients that the extent to which they are willing to take responsibility for the problem will be the extent to which they experience a solution and power and freedom.

So I totally break apart the idea of a 50/50 marriage. And this is sort of something -- I mean, I love Dr. Phil for many reasons but I call it Dr. Phil philosophy, that a lot of people walk in my office saying that, "This has to be a 50/50 and if he's not willing to do the work then I'm not going to do it."

Well, the problem with that is when a couple is polarized and each one is standing far apart from each other pointing fingers at the other and saying, "You're the problem. I'll start working when I see that you're willing to risk and to do some of this hard work." They are giving 49 percent and they're waiting for their partner to show up doing 50.

And then, as they're waiting for their partner to show up doing 50, their partner is looking at them and saying, "Well, they're only doing 49 percent. I'm not stepping forward until I see them doing 50." So they pull back to 49 and it just gets worse and worse as they get farther and farther apart, with lots of good excuses and reasons which they can get lots of agreement on by their moms, sisters, brothers, husbands -- if it's an ex or something, they can go and talk to their ex about the current husband. They can get all kinds of agreement on their point of view that makes the other person bad and continues to keep them separate.

So the analogy is that there's a coin and on one side of it is freedom, which everybody tells me they want -- they want empowerment and they want freedom -- but the other side of it is responsibility. And if they're willing to have the responsibility over the change in their relationship then they can have the empowerment and the freedom.

At that point we then move into kind of distinguishing the specific things that have actually been working for them in this relationship the way that it's been. No human being does something that has zero percent payoff for them. And so we'll look through it. This is probably the hardest part for all of us. I mean, everyone contributes to their own unhappiness but doesn't realize they are because there is something in it for them that they may be selling out for or that they may be settling for.

An example of that would be like when -- I use the finances as an example. A woman may justify that, "Well, I'm not that happy and he controls the use of spending and the use of money in our relationship and stuff like that. I don't like that but at least he provides for us." And so that's a sellout. That's a settling for less than what she really wants. But as long as that's okay with her at any time in the relationship, as long as she settles for that and does not speak up and she's passive about that, then she's not going to get anything but that.

So we kind of look and see where have you not taken a stand in the areas where you could but you've been justifying it by taking a smaller version of what you wanted? And we kind of pull those out and look at them. And I ask people to be responsible for that rather than justify it, explain it, or give me excuses or reasons. I just say, "Look, nothing needs to be explained or justified. This just is the way that it is. And we don't want it to stay this way if you want the change that you're looking for."

And at that point we then move into kind of the amends portion where I teach people how to actually move past their past, how to

get over their pain, how to release it, surrender it, let it go, forgive. They have to clean up -- sometimes they have to clean up some big messes they've made in their past and learn from them and surrender their resentments.

And then the final stage is to kind of make new agreements with each other and start to develop a new paradigm, new promises, new commitments which are based on each individual person's willingness to take 100 percent responsibility and their personal integrity and purpose-driven commitments. These are based on what's important to you that's been missing in the relationship all this time that you really want to be present in your marriage.

And when we identify those things then each person becomes held accountable to it because it's their word. It's not waiting for the other person to show up and prove that they're taking that risk.

Each person becomes so empowered through this process that they realize my word is who I am. And then they start to really relate to their word as -- really literally like as their identity. Like, what I say -- who I am is partnership for my marriage, true partnership; equality; honoring the other person's needs, rights, beliefs and feelings. Then we're not looking out at the other person to do that; we are holding ourselves accountable to that.

Lee Rosen: It sounds like a great process. Makes a lot of sense and it sounds like you -- sometimes I think we worry as consumers of this type of counseling that no one really is in the driver's seat.

Liza Shaw: I think that's a very smart concern because, as I said before -- and I recognize this is a bias of mine -- but a lot of counselors are out claiming that they do couples therapy and marriage therapy and they have not been adequately trained to do so. They are individual trained therapists, and they're very talented to work with one person. But it takes a very unique kind of training to be able to kind of navigate this very complex stuff because you get more than one person in the room and we're dealing with a right and wrong kind of a context and the therapist, if they don't know what they're doing, it's going to come across like they're siding with one person or the other.

Lee Rosen: Right. I hear that a lot from people. Well, I really appreciate you walking us through the process that you use. I'm wondering -- actually, as we speak I'm looking at your website while you're talking, at PowerToThrive.com. And I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

Tell us a little bit about what else you've got going on aside from all the work you're doing with people and with couples. What else are you working on?

Liza Shaw: Sure. Well, I've got a blog on my website, which is always kind of fun to participate in. And I've got other folks that write in and I welcome any comments or questions at PowerToThrive.com.

I also am just now starting to develop my own Internet Web show, just like your blog, where we'll be addressing some -- you know, just these same kind of questions, issues about how to have thriving relationships. I've got planned some interviews with people who have kind of been through very difficult circumstances and come out the other side living really amazing lives.

That's PowerToThriveRadio.com.

Lee Rosen: Okay. PowerToThriveRadio.com. We'll put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Liza Shaw: Great. The Power to Thrive therapy that I've just described is something -- it's sort of a work in progress but the therapists that work for me currently at my practice have been, I'd say -- if you want to call it trained in that method. It's never been an overt kind of "here's how it goes," but I am in the process of developing it so that I can train other therapists to do this kind of work because it just works. And if something works, we should be doing it more. So that's something I'm working on.

And the last thing that I wanted to mention is I am at the beginning stages of writing a book, which is actually a fiction book but it's based on my experiences as a therapist and actually as a client also.

Lee Rosen: Right. Using story to really help people it sounds like is what you're headed for. I think that is a very powerful way to communicate rather than writing something that is non-fiction.

Liza Shaw: Yes. Exactly.

Lee Rosen: I think a lot of great authors have done that where they tell powerful stories and you learn as much or more from that as you would from somebody telling you how to do things.

Liza Shaw: Yeah. I see myself as sort of -- what I'm going for is to be sort of a John Grisham of the therapy world.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that works. I love some John Grisham.

Liza Shaw: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Well, listen. I really appreciate you being with us. And I want to just mention again to folks the PowerToThrive.com. I was flipping around the site and of course the first thing I clicked on was the article about sex. So I can tell you that's worth visiting. Check it out at PowerToThrive.com and PowerToThriveRadio.com.

And so thank you so much for being with us. I really appreciate it.

Liza Shaw: Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: Those of you that listen every week, I really am very grateful that you do that. I want to remind you that we love your comments. We get so much feedback from folks and really appreciate all of that. We'd love to hear more from you. You can reach us in a number of ways. Probably the best way is to put a comment up at StayHappilyMarried.com right there on the site. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. And we have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. We'd love to hear more from you, so keep in touch.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the Web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.