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Spotting an Emotionally Destructive Marriage

This is Episode number 75 of Stay Happily Married, "Spotting an Emotionally Destructive Marriage."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Today I'm really excited to have as my guest Dr. Michael Hall. Michael has a Ph.D. in counseling psychology and a master's of education in school psychology. He's a licensed professional counselor and a career management fellow. He lives and practices in Charlotte, North Carolina -- practices with his wife Barbara. She has an independent practice where -- he provides counseling, coaching, consultation services for individuals, couples, corporations, really does the whole range of things. And I'm very pleased that we're able to have him here to talk about emotionally destructive marriages.

Welcome to the show, Michael.

Michael Hall: Well, thank you, Lee. I'm excited to be here and to talk about this topic because it sometimes goes a little under the radar. We know what to look for generally; whether we do something about it or not is another matter. But we generally know what to do and recognize when there are physical signs of mistreatment. But we are a little less aware of what to do if it's emotional. How do you put your hands around it? So I'm excited about speaking to that today.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I am too. And I agree with you. You know, when somebody is being physically abused, that's just so obvious; literally, they have a black eye or a --

Michael Hall: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: -- broken bone or just horrific stories. But this whole idea of emotional abuse, I think it is a very -- may be a difficult thing -- it's a subtle thing. And people throw the term around a lot and so I don't really know what it means. What are you thinking about, what are you looking for, when you're talking about somebody that really is -- that they're emotionally abused? And that word -- where it really means something? What does that look like?

Michael Hall: Sure. I mean, one of the ways that's really helpful is to perhaps dial it back on the word "abuse" and maybe substitute for the word of "mistreatment" and that may help people to enlarge their capacity to consider whether or not they have a healthy emotional marriage. And that's really --

Lee Rosen: So what does mistreatment look like? I can buy that. What are you looking for?

Michael Hall: Yeah. Let me talk about the difference between mistreatment and difficulty. We know that we're all going to have times, particularly in marriage or any intimate relationship, where we have differences and where we may say things that don't feel like we're on a picnic and that we're lovey-dovey. And so we may think about those as difficult times in a marriage or difficult verbal interactions or difficult exchanges in a marriage.

The difference is that in difficult situations we can spot that we are growing. And so with the exchange or with the decision that has to be made or with the need to go and to correct one's behavior or attitude or actions one can see how there's a learning that occurs.

What you have when it is destructive or unhealthy is, one, there is no growth, where an individual feels that their basic needs, their basic rights as a human being are being violated or being underappreciated.

So that's the real difference, again, between just simply a difficult time or a difficult spot and when it is actually destructive. It demeans a person. It removes them from those basic needs that we have as human beings.

Lee Rosen: Okay. I can see that. So there are times where things are not going well but everybody's learning from the experience. And then there are times when things are not going well and what one spouse is doing to the other is really just damaging them in some way. I guess

they're not growing; they're shrinking. They're really doing the opposite of growing.

Michael Hall: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: But like realistically -- so my wife goes to the grocery store. I ask for the diet caffeine free Diet Coke, which some people would say, "Why not just drink water?" But anyway, she decides I'm not getting the diet caffeine free Diet Coke because she would rather I drink the water and comes home empty-handed. And I make some snippy remark about her ice cream or -- and nobody's growing. There's no growth happening in that interaction.

But what's the difference between really a damaging, emotionally destructive kind of relationship, and the occasional maybe stepping away from growth and toward shrinking?

Michael Hall: That's a good illustration of the difficult -- what may be a momentary -- we're not always our best selves and so we do say things that are not growth-enhancing, that can be hurtful. So that may be more occasional.

The important word to hold onto can be where you see a pattern, a pattern of interaction or conversation that demeans or belittles another person. So it really is that pattern that you want to look for that happens across a marriage lifetime.

Lee Rosen: Right. So it's not just the ice cream/Diet Coke episode. It's really every -- or lots of interactions.

Michael Hall: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Michael Hall: And you kind of know that when people say, "What's the point? Is it the first time, the second time, the third time? Is it the 80th time before I actually do something about it? What should I look for?"

Often times one of the first indicators will be -- and because we're talking about it emotionally, it will be this sense of -- kind of an internal sense that I'm not being regarded, I'm not being cheered for, that my thoughts, my feelings, my needs are not having their day in the sun in the marriage. And so that's a way in which a person might say, "Well, how do I know if I'm kind of leaning in that direction? Is this just simply kind of an occasional we're in a tough part? Is there some pressures at work and so I'm a little short-tempered and quick to snap at home?" Or whether or not it is

something that requires a much deeper work around, a much deeper solution.

Lee Rosen: Do you find in most of these emotionally abusive marriages that the emotionally abusive pattern started before the marriage? Was this something that went on when they were dating or does it usually get triggered by something after they've been together for a while?

Michael Hall: Both. You're going to like that answer. It really is both. You can see it beforehand. I've seen many cases where individuals either will say on their own or their spouse will say there was really no evidence before that. And some of that can make sense. During the dating, or what we officially call relationship formation period, we're on our best behavior. And so typical and frequent ways of communicating and reacting, expressing our needs, our preferences, can be disguised.

So one of the reasons that it is advised that during the formation -- or what we in the old days called courtship periods -- is so critical is it allows for the putting the best foot forward to migrate in the direction of what are you really like when there isn't "so much on the line"?

So again, the longer a couple are in relationship, the more likely they're going to be in situations where the ideal self and the self that's going to show up more times than not across the relationship can emerge. So that's how it is that sometimes you will see a pattern and it gets ignored and other times you won't see these patterns and they will just simply show up later.

Lee Rosen: Does it tend to be that the emotionally abusive spouse, the person who is doing this bad stuff, does that tend to be more often the husband or the wife or is it 50/50?

Michael Hall: We don't have really good data in terms of the percentages. And so in terms of gender equality on this, I mean, it's fair to assume that it is an equal opportunity problem.

Lee Rosen: Got you.

Michael Hall: Equal opportunity pattern. You may see it associated with some temperament or personality traits or characteristics and those, again, don't necessarily show up more in one gender or the other.

Lee Rosen: What sort of things are going on with the abuser? What kind of issues do they have that make them behave this way?

Michael Hall: Well, some people -- and let's talk a little bit about this in terms of the sort of relationship theory that may be helpful. Some people talk about it obviously in terms of when people have other mental or psychological issues going on where they may be intentionally, as it were, or may be hurtful as a way of interacting with the entire external world. So there can be some of those kinds of personality issues or mental health issues.

But more than likely what we have are not so much personality issues as much as we have relationship styles and other unmet emotional needs that really come underneath it. Let me get a little bit more specific about that.

One of the patterns that we look for is -- again, the obvious part is when a person is so unhappy that they do things that physically hurt another person, whether it's physical, sexual, then verbally, again, putting another person down with their words. Again, when that is a repeated pattern then that's a sign that emotionally we're not healthy here.

A second is when one individual dominates, when they try to control the thoughts, the wishes, the feelings of their spouse. And so that's another sign or symptom to be alerted to that a person may be moving into or in an emotionally destructive marriage.

The reverse of the controlling or domineering is the overdependence, the individual that simply depends -- "I can't make a choice. I can't decide. Whatever you want. Whatever you want. I need, I need, I need, I need." And they are, again, overly dependent.

Then the fourth one that we see -- fourth of five -- is of course deceit. And this is really massively destructive and when it comes to the surface that a person has been untruthful that often is a major blow in terms of the emotional barometer in a marriage because at the foundation the opposite of deceit and truthfulness is the whole basis of trust. I'm going to be vulnerable with you with my needs and my wants and my preferences. When those are violated when I discover that you have been inconsistent and have intentionally masked the meaning of those needs and agreements then that deceit robs a basis of trust. And so that's a major deflation in a marriage, feeling like there is this intimate bond that's there. So that's one we see.

And then finally, just apathy. Just plain old "who gives a hoot?" Again, you can see much subtle -- I mean, there are no signs. There isn't an aggressiveness that you see with either the physical, sexual,

or verbal abuse, or even the dominating part. "No, we're not going to go there this year; we're going to spend the holidays with my folks as we always do." Discussion closed. That tends to be harsh. That tends to be stated with a lot more forcefulness in language. But apathy on the other side is, "I don't care. We can go or we can stay. Your parents, my family during the holidays." And again, much subtler but also has a way -- like a slow leak in a tire, it can run on it for a while but it has a way of ending in a flat -- emotionally flat relationship -- marriage, flat marriage just as well.

Lee Rosen: It's very interesting. And that all makes sense to me. But listening to you explain it -- I talk to counselors and psychologists all the time and you're -- I'm always impressed when I'm talking to you because you do have such a scientifically based and analytical framework for examining all of this. And sometimes -- and I think all of us as consumers of mental health services, sometimes we feel a little bit like the expert is kind of winging it.

Michael Hall: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And it is nice in hearing it laid out in an orderly way and realizing, hey, somebody knows what's going on here and they had a scientific basis for seeing it that way and they can explain it. I really appreciate that.

Let me ask you this. Some people, I think -- you know, I've been out to dinner with people and I'll watch a couple and I will think, gosh, this woman really is being emotionally abused but she doesn't seem to see it or -- and I don't want to get involved. But do you feel like sometimes people don't realize that they're living with that level of behavior that really does rise to be abuse and they're just so used to it they don't even feel it or see it?

Michael Hall: Absolutely. Absolutely, Lee. And that's part of the reason, that's part of the dynamic, that's part of the course of the phenomena as to why it's so painful and it goes on so long that an intervention or a change does not occur.

So for example, what frequently happens is that an individual is unaware of what health or balance looks like. And so, for example, if I spent much of my childhood years and teen years in a household where people had loud voices and said, "No, I don't want to come to the table for breakfast. I'm going to have dinner in my room today," then if I'm in a relationship where basic communication pattern is barking at one another then I may think and feel that that's normal. And so I won't intervene and say, "Honey, I need you to communicate with me in a softer and a gentler voice that pulls me

towards you, that doesn't push me away." But if I'm accustomed to that and think that that's normal then I will not respond immediately.

What happens is, it's like there's a meter ticking, though, on the emotional meter and the love tank or the emotional -- yeah, the emotional love tank -- is registering the fact that, yes, even though I think it's normal it does cause me to close, it causes me to shut down, it causes me to not be as vulnerable.

So yes, people can often not be aware of it because they've grown accustomed to it and so their normal is not healthy.

Lee Rosen: So flipping that upside down, it's also I guess conceivable that the abusive spouse doesn't realize that they're behaving that way.

Michael Hall: Absolutely. And this is what often makes it so painful when individuals, on their own through self-help books or will seek out a counselor or a professional to help them to learn different ways of responding and showing up in a marriage, will talk about the fact that -- we look for sort of three patterns in the perpetrator, in the abusing spouse.

And that often is the unwillingness to see. "Honey, when you raise your voice and tell me about what it is that I was supposed to get at the store, I find it --" "What do you mean? All I want to do is make sure you hear me in that part of the house." So again, an unwillingness to see that their behavior is hurtful and it's not adult, it's not respectful.

So they can't see it. "Well, remember your cousin said so and so last year when we were at the bar mitzvah. Your brother came up to you and commented that you always communicate with family as if there's only one way and that's your way. And there isn't even a highway; it's simply your way. And so it's not just me but then --" "Oh, I don't think -- my brother would never say that." Again, inability to not only see it when you point it out but hear as well.

And then of course the third component is even if they're able to see it, even if they're able to hear it, an unwillingness to change. And that's when it starts to feel destructive. It'll be destructive before then but that's when it will start to feel destructive to the person who's on the receiving end when they say, "I've tried to bring it to my spouse's attention in gentle ways and less than gentle ways and they deflected. They defend themselves. They put it on me. They say I'm crazy; I'm making it up. I wear my feelings on my sleeve. I've got to get tough skin. You'll get eaten alive in this world if you don't

toughen it up. But I still feel very small. I still feel very uncared for emotionally in this relationship, in this marriage. And this person's not going to change."

Lee Rosen: You mentioned people doing things like reading self-help books and stuff about this topic. Do you see a lot of people doing that before they come and visit with you?

Michael Hall: I would say it's fairly evenly distributed in terms of people who may try some self-help method before they reach out, as well as people who will simply recognize there's something here that's not quite right. "I can't put my hand on it. Let's go and find out what it is." And so a good part of it will be to start with, what have you tried that has worked and what have you tried that hasn't worked? So yes, some people will do that kind of detective work on their own and do that.

I notice, for example, when I spend -- I hang out at the library a lot. My wife says she doesn't have to worry about me going to some place that's going to be detrimental to my health or our relationship; she knows I hang out at the library. And so I notice the books that the pages are dog-eared. And so in the relationship area I notice the books that talk about and say, well, this is what a healthy relationship looks like. Here's some ways in which you can get yourself healthy in the relationship, even if your spouse won't change, and then you can make some determinations about the longevity of the marriage and the relationship.

So people, I do find, make a great deal of use of those books. If there's something there that I want to check out so I can refer it to people who work with me or people who say, "I'm not sure I need professional assistance with this right now but how can I read up more on it?" So I'll check books out that way. And so the books, if I look for them and they're not there, that's telling me that somebody's checking them out and doing the work that they need.

So yeah, people are starting to do more of that because we're doing much more on television and much more on the popular periodicals at the grocery store. People speak more about relationships and issues and many of us -- because we're social beings and we want to know better and a lot more about us. So there's a lot more openness to it and a lot more openness to gaining information about it.

Lee Rosen: Well, I can see where a book like -- a self-help type book might be easy for the person being abused to spot their issues and realize they have a problem, but it just doesn't seem like the person doing the abusing is going to be spending a lot of time worried about

having a problem. You wouldn't think they'd be hunting through the shelves.

Michael Hall: That's correct. That's correct. When it does happen, that's an indication that the person is a lot healthier and in a lot of the areas where their spouse may say, "Honey, I think, I suspect that the way in which you give me room to be an individual while we're also building our coupleship is a little out of balance." "Oh, really? How so? Let me check it out and see."

So sometimes that will occur. And usually when that occurs, that's a sign, again, that a person is really, really strong in a lot of areas and so they're open to that. They're open to the feedback and they're willing to do something immediately about that.

But more times than not, the individual will not. You'll see things like -- some of the clues in terms of what's going on in the violator is a strong sense of pride, this sense that, again, they know everything. If they don't know it, they knew it at one time but they've just forgotten.

Or this exorbitant fear which gets masked as controlling or dominating. A lot of times we of course know and we're talking about children or bullies, or some people say the same thing about nations, but that when we are afraid we cover that and we cover it with a need to dominate.

Or sometimes it's anger or envy; sometimes those will fuel any of those patterns of dominating or overdependence or even deceitfulness. And then sometimes people are just simply lazy and they don't want the effort of what does it take to build a healthy, strong relationship?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, it'd be much easier to tell my spouse what to do. It just doesn't seem to work for me.

Michael Hall: It does not. It does not.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So let's assume somebody recognizes they have a problem and either they've tried the self-help route or they've just decided this is not something that I can use self-help on so they show up in your office. Where do you start? What's the first step for helping somebody through this kind of situation?

Michael Hall: The first thing is to recognize and to celebrate that the person has enough self-regard to reach out. Then when it comes to what do I do, we often talk about you'll want to speak up. Are there ways in

which you have shared this concern, this observation, your feelings with your spouse and your partner? So we talk about being willing to speak up.

Sometimes they say, "Well, if I do that it might get worse. It may irritate." Yes. So you'll need to judge that if you suspect that it may move from just being the domination or the deceitfulness or the apathy or not caring. But if it may tip over into the physical side then you need to weigh that differently. But yes, you can speak up and it won't necessarily get better right away but that's the first step.

Then the second step is to step back. What are the ways in which you can deescalate, we say? Meaning, don't let it come to a place where there's a bit argument and that you can just simply step back and say, "Well, if you don't want me to make those choices and you need to dominate then I'll let you handle that." And so you want to create some space that can create an opportunity for your spouse to see what they will not hear you say. So you create a little bit of space.

And then the last step is if you've spoken up and you've stepped back to create a little space without bringing it into the marriage is sometimes you have to step away. And by step away, there's a range there and I work with individuals to figure out what does it mean to step away. Does that mean, "Listen, I can't allow you to speak to me this way. I'm going to get in my car and I'm going to go and do the grocery shopping. I usually don't shop until the day after tomorrow but in order to keep from getting in a place where I think less of you and less of us, I'm going to step back and I'm going to not be here in the house right now."

So that can be an example of stepping back or stepping away, so again to create a greater distance with the idea that with that greater distance you not only have safety for you but then you also have an opportunity for your spouse to realize what they're doing is detaching from you. And that sometimes can help them to see and to hear and to agree to some self-change.

So those are kind of the three general steps that I move people to ways in which they can speak up -- we call that assertiveness -- ways in which they can step back and kind of deescalate so that things don't get revved up and maybe move towards the physical violence step. And then the last one is, are there ways in which you can create some temporary space? Maybe have to move out for a while or stay with a best friend for a while or change your at home time.

So you look at those as options as ways to communicate that a change is needed and that a change must occur.

Lee Rosen: When you meet with the person who comes in with this issue are you optimistic or pessimistic about the marriage working out?

Michael Hall: I am always optimistic and I'm optimistic that the person can have less stress and greater happiness. Period.

The part about the marriage working out is where I would change your statement. So yes, it's like a dance. Marriage, as you've heard, people relate to it as a dance. So yes, we can our partner in a dance to move a little slower, watch out for my feet. They may or they may not but we still have the ability as an individual to change the dance by changing the speed of it ourselves. Now, the person may resist but you will change the dance when one person changes.

So I always start with, how about suspending the question -- if it's really been going on for a long time and it's really severe, how about suspending the question about whether or not the marriage can be saved and let's move toward how do we change the way in which you interact, such that you have less stress and that you are as healthy as you can be. And then you can make a decision about whether there is a history or a future in the marriage.

So we go for safety, we go for getting health as an individual, then make a decision about the marriage.

Lee Rosen: Makes a lot of sense. Well, Michael, this is a tough issue and I appreciate you taking the time to talk it through with us today. I really am very grateful that you were willing to share your expertise with us. Thank you.

Michael Hall: You're very, very welcome. I mean, always want people to be hopeful and to recognize that to stay in pain is really an option and that pain is unavoidable. Suffering is usually a choice and so having the kind of information we talked about can help people to get healthy and to argue for and stand up for health in their marriage.

Lee Rosen: Words of wisdom. Thank you so much.

Michael Hall: You're very welcome.

Lee Rosen: You can find out more about Michael's practice by calling him in Charlotte, North Carolina. The number is (704) 858-2984. And Michael does individual and couple's counseling.

One thing you may not know about him but that I do is that he really is renowned for his career counseling. Recently he's been doing a lot of work with lawyers. With the whole economy and the economic situation, a lot of lawyers having their careers change without it being their plan, a lot of lawyer layoffs and that sort of thing, like everything else. And I know he's been doing a lot of work with lawyers and other professionals. A great guy. Very, very expert on these topics. And if you're experiencing these issues I think Michael is just a great guy to talk with and see what you can do.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We love to hear your comments. You can post comments right here on the site at StayHappilyMarried.com. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We love to hear from you, get your feedback; it really is very helpful to us.

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.