



STAY
happily married
.com

Stop the Fighting

This is episode Stay Happily Married #103, "Stop the Fighting."

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

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by Skype with Paul Shaffer. Paul has been a professional counselor for about 25 years. He's helped individuals and couples with some of the toughest issues imaginable. He's done work not only in an office setting but in hospitals and in prisons as well.

He opened up his own practice -- it's called Right Choices Counseling -- back in 2004 and he just moved his office from Davidson, North Carolina over to Huntersville, North Carolina.

Welcome to the show, Paul.

Paul Shaffer: Thank you. Good to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad you could join us. Today we're going to dig in and talk about how conflict presents itself in a marriage and the problems that arise when communication problems become a real stumbling block for couples. And I know that you have written quite a bit about this topic.

Your book is *Conflict Resolution for Couples*. What sparked that?

Paul Schaffer: Well, there was a couple things. Part of it had to do with because I was doing a lot of couples work there was a lot of repetition, the materials I was using with clients. When I first start counseling, the first phase of it is an education phase. And so I was continuing to

www.stayhappilymarried.com

share the same information over and over and it was kind of like, well, wouldn't it be nice to actually have all this written down that I could just hand to the client in some regularly easily available form that they could take out into the real world with them?

So in some ways it was kind of a mixed approach. It was industrious in that I wrote the book, but I'm kind of lazy and it saved me a lot of work in the process.

Lee Rosen: Well, yeah, but it's interesting because I think a lot of books are written sort of in the ivory tower. It's like your book was tested with real people and you were getting feedback every week in your sessions. What was the response? What kind of feedback did you get?

Paul Schaffer: It's funny; there were a couple different things I noticed. Well, first off, the clients who like to read responded well to the book. The other clients that were used to lighter fare or some of the easier self-help stuff had a little bit more difficult time because the book's very content-heavy.

And it was interesting too just in terms of for some people, some concepts would be profound truth; and for others, it left them totally unmoved. So it was very interesting what was some of the great spots for some people were the weak spots for others and vice versa.

Lee Rosen: You know, I can imagine the book working in a certain way with people that you're seeing on a regular basis who are your clients, your patients. How has it gone over with people -- I mean, obviously you've got a lot of people reading it you can't see. You can only see so many people. How has it done out there as a standalone book distinct from being involved in counseling with you?

Paul Schaffer: Well, at this point -- the book was published in 2005 and since then it's gone through two updates, about every two years. And the updates are for a couple reasons. One, because I -- in the same way with the counseling I do it's always -- even what I do is in progression. There's better ways that I learn of doing things or there's better ways of expressing things or presenting things and I wanted to update that information in the book as well.

So, so far, so good. I think the response has usually been that it's user-friendly and that there's definitely a logical progression to how the book progresses.

But one of the other things too with why I wrote the book, I have a 14-year-old daughter and it's kind of like one of those summaries of

if you could share any information with your kids that you could for the rest of their life. You know, at 14 years old I'm not sure how much she really retains when I share with her at this point, but the idea of capturing that information and refer her later on in her own relationships and her own marriage down the road was kind of a cool idea.

Lee Rosen: That is. That's really cool. Yeah. That is a terrific idea. Now, if I go to a counselor, I want to believe that I am a unique and beautiful snowflake and that I'm the only person in the world that has my issues, that this couldn't possibly be happening to anyone else. But when you sit down and you write a book about resolving conflict for couples, obviously you have to have found commonalities, things that we're all experiencing.

And I'm wondering, in your practice and day-to-day, the stuff that was the meat for writing this book, what did you see in terms of what the conflicts look like between couples? What was that all about?

Paul Schaffer: Sure. Well, yeah, it is kind of -- I guess it's a mixed experience in terms of finding out that you're not as unique as you thought. There are a lot of common factors to resolution. In fact, there's a book that I've been sitting on until I find the right publisher; it's called *Any Marriage's Essential Top 10*.

And the idea of the top 10 is that there are 10 common factors that I kept running into again and again with different couples. And we're going to be talking today about reactivity, but what's interesting to me is each of those 10 factors contribute to a relationship becoming reactive. And let me just give you an idea.

If I take five of the top 10, one of the first ones would be overly rigid role expectations. Now, just the idea that couples going into the relationship -- if they see the relationship as being static, that it is what it is from the very beginning and it's always going to be that way, and a husband's supposed to this and a wife's supposed to be that, it doesn't recognize that relationships are a progression and that they change over time and the needs of the relationship change. If you add kids to the picture, if you change jobs, if you move, the needs of the relationship shift for a while. And if the relationship is stuck in these rigid roles then it starts to grind down. There has to be a degree of flexibility that goes along with embracing change as time passes.

Lee Rosen: So this is your number one on your list of things really that lead to conflict? Is that what you're saying?

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. That's definitely one of the top five for me. One of the others would be ineffective accountability. Couples have to wrestle with the balance between grace versus accountability, the things that you just have to learn to accept versus the things that require change. And for a lot of couples, they don't know how to approach accountability. Either they avoid it because "I don't want to nag," or they approach it in a very judging, very rejecting way that just pushes the partner away.

So knowing how to be able to approach each other about the health of the relationship, which is really what they're talking about, is a very important thing.

Lee Rosen: So what's an example of that? I mean, the number one, this idea of overly rigid role expectations, that seems pretty easy for me to get. I do think a lot -- we talk about that. We expected one thing; it turns out it's another. And I do think a lot of us are stuck in that idea of maybe what our parents did or whatever. We have those role expectations. But the accountability is a fairly new one for me. And so give me an example of what you're talking about.

Paul Schaffer: Well, one of the routines -- there's basically three routines that I try to teach couples in couples counseling, but one of the big ones is there needs to be some sort of accountability routine. So that there's a platform already established where the couple on a regular basis can sit down and just kind of talk about the state of the relationship. Where are things at at this point?

And it's a balanced exercise; it's not just in terms of -- it's not in terms of how you failed me or how you screwed up; it's in terms of what's working and what's not. So it's giving recognition for the energy that's going into the relationship and providing strokes for each other, which helps them to be able to hear some of the criticisms that follow. And criticisms in terms of healthy stuff like, "We need to take a look at our timelines because we haven't been spending enough time together."

And it's just trying to share information in a way that it's not a rejection; it's just information. "This hasn't been working for us this past week. Let's look at what we can do different next week that would be a better fit."

Lee Rosen: Okay. That makes sense. So those are your top two. What's number three on your list of the top?

Paul Schaffer: Another big one is lack of true intimacy. This is just the idea that folks go into a relationship thinking the relationship is all about getting the chores done, boarding down a job, raising the kids. And

that's the work of the relationship; that's the checklist. But that's not the actual connection.

When you're talking about true intimacy you're talking about what are your goals for the relationship? What does the future look like? What are you guys working towards together? Where would you like to be 10 years from now, 20 years from now? What are your hopes and dreams? What are your fears and anxieties?

And it's the idea of continuing to have a courting relationship in the marriage even though you're already married. The dating process still continues. You came together because of the fun that you had, how enjoyable it was; but if you don't continue to be having fun, to be continuing to have the play, then the relationship becomes all about work and once again it starts to grind down.

Lee Rosen: Right. That leads to conflict. Yeah. What's number four?

Paul Schaffer: Number four is a tough one. It's probably one of the toughest ones I run into. It's different perceptions of reality. It's when you have a couple that chronically gets into these arguments because one person's perception of what happened is very different than what the partner's perception is. "Well, you said this and you said that." "Well, no, that's not what I said. I said this." And how you debate whose memory is best, whose recall was right.

Those are some very difficult things because there are some people that -- particularly the more feeling-based they are, the more emotional are, the more distorted the recall can be. But it's difficult to get them to recognize -- nobody likes to think that their recall's bad. Nobody likes to think that how I remember things isn't quite the way it happened.

But if you're approaching it as a couple that both of you have some of those faulty ways of remembering, you remember what's most important to you and the things that stood out that were either the most hurtful or the most critical or whatever. There's ways around it, but that's a difficult one.

Lee Rosen: Now, you -- okay. And so what's the fifth one? I want to get to that but then I've got another question for you.

Paul Schaffer: The fifth one is lack of emotional maturity or poor character. This isn't so much a dynamic with the relationship as the individual. When you've got somebody -- in terms of emotional maturity, let me tell you what I mean by it.

Emotional immaturity is somebody where the feelings dictate the choices. If I feel angry, I go off. If I feel depressed, I act depressed. If I feel anxious, I have a panic attack. The feelings are calling all the shots.

So the idea of emotional maturity is learning to guard or guide -- guide our thinking as well as choosing healthy behaviors that help direct the feelings rather than the feelings directing us. And it's a tough one because it requires a degree of discipline that you just don't -- it doesn't come over night. It takes a lot of practice. Emotional maturity/character is something you develop and it can be a slow process, particularly if you don't have somebody to model it for you.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. Makes sense. So these are the things that you started - - you said they're actually -- this is your top five. You've really got a list of 10.

Paul Schaffer: A list of 10.

Lee Rosen: And this is the next book is what you're telling me.

Paul Schaffer: Yes.

Lee Rosen: So these are the sorts of things, though, that enabled you to write about conflict resolution because you could see these common threads that are the root of all conflict, I guess. Is that kind of where we're going with that?

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. I mean, each of these are factors that lead to a couple becoming what I call reactive.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. And you keep using that word and I want to ask you about that. Okay. So reactive; what does that -- tell me what you mean by that.

Paul Schaffer: Well the idea of reactive -- a reactive couple is kind of the worst case scenario for a relationship. It's one of the most serious types of dysfunctional communication. The idea is that you've got a couple who reacts to each other's reactions. In other words, each person keeps waiting for the other person to do the right thing. And if they're not going to do it, then I'm not going to do it.

It's funny because there's a bit of a paradox with it that -- in most arguments we're trying to gain some degree of control in the argument, whether it's steering it in the direction we want it to go or to make our point, to win the argument, whatever. But reactive couples are always giving their control away. They're losing their

temper. They're trying to dominate the conversation by talking over the other person or whatever. But their feelings are running the conversation; they're no longer actually intellectually moving the conversation in a healthy direction to a healthy resolution. So it's --

Lee Rosen: Because they're kind of losing it, right? I mean, is that what you're -

Paul Schaffer: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Okay.

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. So for a lot of couples it's pointing out, what are you trying to accomplish here? And if what they're trying to accomplish is to have some control over the conversation, in hopefully a positive way, it's helping them to see that that's not the way to do it. You're not getting what you want. It's reality therapy 101. It's, "How's that working for you?" "Well, it's not." So at what point are you going to try something different?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. You know, it's fascinating you say that because I see that -- becoming reactive, I see it less in my life with my wife than I do at work. And it's true. It's like, once somebody steps over that line, they really have lost their -- they have given away their control. I mean, I think you're nailing it exactly.

And thankfully I don't have that -- very often, anyway -- go on at home; but boy, for me you're hitting the nail on the head with what I see in the office sometimes. I guess you see this in all kinds of relationships.

Paul Schaffer: Sure. I mean, styles tend to cross scenarios. In other words, if you have an aggressive style of communication, you tend to be aggressive in the work situation, as a parent, with your partner, with your friends, whatever. If you have more of a passive style, that tends to be reflected as well.

I mean, there are some aspects of this that are specific just to couples. With friends or with employees, fellow workers, whatever, there's always this degree of distance we can have from them just because we can always rationalize, well, they don't really know us or they don't know us -- if they reject us or they criticize us, we can look at it as -- give them the benefit of the doubt that they didn't really understand the situation or whatever.

But when it's our partner, who supposedly does know us so well and is still rejecting us or criticizing us or whatever, it's a lot harder to deal with because it's so much more personal.

March 15, 2010 - Stop the Fighting

Lee Rosen: Right. So when you're doing your work, I mean, obviously you know the source of the conflict and you're digging into that and you've got this person who is becoming reactive in the conflict. Have you got a system or a plan for how you help to break that pattern and how to get somebody back on track?

Paul Schaffer: Sure. Well, a lot of it at the beginning is helping them understand the dysfunctional pattern. It's that education of what they do wrong in order for them to be aware of what they need to do right. And it's understanding a lot of the reactive cycle is you're going with instinct. You're doing what comes naturally, but --

And that's why it's so difficult to shift, because the conflict resolution isn't natural. What you're being asked to do in order to resolve conflict is to not attack, to not run away, but to stay there and work it out, which for most folks is not comfortable. So for a lot of folks it's learning how to tolerate discomfort in order to be able to work things out.

But the idea of things being reactive is that because it's instinct, it's fight or flight. It's either attack or withdraw. And those are all ways that we try to self-protect. So it's teaching people to try to be vulnerable rather than self-protect if you're really going to get at what needs to be worked out.

With reactions what we're typically advertising is our anger. Even if we're withdrawing and we're just holding that anger to ourselves, it's still the anger that we're most in touch with. But we're usually only angry because we've been hurt. It's usually because we care about this person and they've done something that was either hurtful or neglectful or whatever, but that's hardly ever what actually gets talked about.

What gets displayed is our rejection of them because we feel rejected. And the only way to start moving past some of that reactive cycle is to go the opposite direction. Rather than covering up and pushing them away, trying to draw closer by actually getting to the core of what's going on with us, that we've been hurt and this is why.

Lee Rosen: Right. It just makes a lot of sense. And what you really -- so I feel like what we've done now is you have really made it clear to me that you get it in terms of where people are coming from and how they're reacting. And I can tell we're right on the verge of getting into how do you fix it and how do you solve it? And I'm looking at the clock and it's like we're out of time.

March 15, 2010 - Stop the Fighting

And so I'm going to beg you to do another show with me where we just run through step-by-step how you solve this conflict and what your system is for doing that, because I think that would be tremendously helpful to people. Are you able to do that?

Paul Schaffer: Yep. Sure. Sounds good to me.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Then let's wrap up now. We'll schedule our next one. Let me just remind folks about who you are and what you're doing and where they can catch up with you.

Paul's practice -- his website is RightChoicesCounseling.com. You can also reach his office; the number is (704) 578-2725.

And Paul, thank you so much for being a part of the show and I'm really looking forward to digging into the meat of this thing in what we'll call "part two." Thank you so much.

Paul Schaffer: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: And thank you all for listening in today. I promise you we will dig into the details of how to resolve these problems with Paul. Great program today and I think hearing the solutions will be even more enlightening and exciting. Thank you so much for listening. I hope that you will join us next time.

In the meantime, if you have comments you'd like to -- and feedback you'd like to give us, let me give you the number. It's (919) 256-3083. We have a comment line set up with a voice mail box there for you.

You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Let us know how we're doing. Give us any feedback that you can. We very much appreciate it and we use it to build new shows as we go forward.

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.