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Five Tools for Conflict Resolution

This is Stay Happily Married #104, "Five Tools for Conflict Resolution."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by Skype with Paul Schaffer. Paul has been on the show before to talk about his book *Conflict Resolution for Couples* and to take a look at why dysfunctional communication is so common and the damage that it can cause in a marriage.

And when I had Paul here last time he promised that he would come back and talk us through his model for resolving conflict. So what we're going to do today is that he is going to walk us step-by-step through the conflict model he's developed after 20 years of counseling. He's going to go into detail on each of the five tools for ending the cycle of dysfunctional communication that makes even normal arguments so damaging to a marriage.

Paul's been a professional counselor for almost 25 years. He just moved his practice, Right Choices Counseling, from Davidson, North Carolina over to Huntersville, North Carolina.

Paul, welcome back to the show.

Paul Schaffer: Thank you. Good to be here.

Lee Rosen: You know, we were talking -- in the last show that we did we talked about people who really -- I think they sort of lose it. And you had a term you used for when somebody is just so angry. How do you describe that?

Paul Schaffer: The idea of a reactive couple, where one person reacts to the other person's reaction and each person keeps waiting for the other to do the right thing first.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And I think all of us have been there. We've been in conversations where -- I really like your terminology, calling it being reactive or the reactive couple because we've all been there.

And what I loved about your description of that was that it's like we're all trying to win the argument, but once we become reactive it's almost like we are giving away -- we're no longer in control. We have no shot now. We've just gone -- I mean, I'm no expert; you're the expert. But it's like we've gone berserk. That's probably not in your academic books on psychology. But it is. I mean, it's like we do, we lose it when we get to that point and we're not running the show anymore at all.

Paul Schaffer: Right. And that's kind of the heads-up for a lot of folks is they have to -- somebody has to hold up the mirror to them initially and hopefully over time they get good holding up the mirror to themselves of seeing where they're at and where they need to go.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. You kind of know you're there and you've got -- okay. So once I know that I'm there -- I am now reactive. I mean, it sounds like I'm a nuclear reactor that is melting down. But once I'm in that state, I know that in your book you work through some tools that people can use to kind of get off the ledge and get back to a place where conflict can really be resolved.

And so I made you promise last time you'd walk us through those. And so I guess let's start with tool number one. What is it? And let's work it through.

Paul Schaffer: Well, initially what you're trying to do with the reactive couple is you're trying to get them to slow the process down. Because they've gone through it so many times, it's become a microwaved conversation. You know, rather than this normal, gradual escalation from neutral to frustrated to irritated to angry, it goes straight from neutral to angry now because it's just -- they've had this ritual in place for so long.

So initially what you're trying to get the couple to do is slow things down so there's more opportunity to actually have a conversation. Going back to just taking turns is kind of a big concept.

But the first tool is what I call taking healthy exits. It's recognizing that initially a couple, because they've gone through this -- had this pattern so long -- it's not going to change overnight. So I need to do damage control first. I need to be able to teach them how to stop it before they burn the bridge.

So the idea of a healthy exit is that -- there's really just two roles to healthy exits. One is that either side has the right to end the conversation if it's going too far. In other words, if I feel like I'm about to say something hurtful or my partner's already starting to go there, I've got two options: I either need to try to redirect the conversation and see if we can get back on track, or if it's already gone too far I need to call it for what it is. I need to say, "Let's stop this and re-approach it later when we're a little bit calmer."

So obviously the second part to this first rule is that if I'm asking to leave, my partner needs to let me go. Because for a lot of couples what happens is one person tries to escape, to get away before things get too intense, but they've got the other partner chasing them through the house trying to pull them back into the conversation.

So the idea is it has to go both ways. We have to recognize that if I do pull my partner back in when they're saying they've already hit their limit, I'm asking for a failed scenario. I'm asking for things to go horribly wrong because they've already told me that they're at that point.

Lee Rosen: So you call that healthy exit. Okay. So rule -- go ahead. Yeah?

Paul Schaffer: Sure. Well, the second rule to healthy exit is that whoever ends the conversation assumes responsibility to re-approach the issue. Because usually the person who's seeking to run away and the person who's trying to chase after them, they're chasing after them because often there's a pattern in the relationship where one person's always trying to escape a situation and avoid, avoid, avoid. So by history then they've kind of taught their partner that the only way you're going to get me to talk about this stuff is to force it.

So at the beginning it's kind of like you're trying to show each other that you can be respectful of these rules, that if you let me step away from it, you don't have to chase me; I'll bring it back to you. And part of that for a lot of couples is they have to attach a timeframe to it. I mean, if the issue is around what needs to happen before you guys go out for dinner tonight, obviously you don't have a couple days to play with it. So somebody needs to be able to say, "Give me

two, three hours to step away and I promise I'll bring it back and we can step back into this."

Lee Rosen: Right. These tips -- just so obvious as I sit here and listen to you. These tips work -- you have to agree on these tips. Obviously you have to negotiate it when you're not --

Paul Schaffer: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. You can't pop this up in the middle of the conflict. But gosh, these things sound like they would work not just in a marriage but in any relationship you're trying to make more productive.

Paul Schaffer: Right. As a parent to a child, as an employer to an employee. Yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. I also am just -- it really strikes me when you talk about the speed. When you have a history, you move so quickly from -- boom, in the blink of an eye you're at your maximum upset. It happens so quickly when you have that history I guess because all that just becomes the way your brain works or whatever with this person. When they piss you off, your head explodes without -- and a new person would take a while to piss you off.

Paul Schaffer: Well, and that's just it. With reactive couples what you're trying to teach them at the beginning is to approach and withdraw. And that's a little bit different from -- I talked before in terms of when you react it's fight or flight. And flight's a little bit different than what I'm talking about with the healthy exit. If you're seeking flight, you're withdrawing, withdrawing, withdrawing. You're avoiding talking about it. You're suppressing the anger and nothing gets resolved.

Where with the healthy exit you're stepping away in order to calm back down and then you're stepping back in and seeing if you can take it a little bit further. So it's like gradual approximations until hopefully you can move through the whole issue.

Lee Rosen: Got you. Okay. So this first tool that we've talked about is healthy exit. What's tool number two?

Paul Schaffer: Well, tool number two has to do with -- with reactive couples, most of their communication is around making statements. They're not looking for information; they're telling each other what's going on with the other person. They've already assumed. They've already decided what's happening here and they're telling the other person how they feel about it by advertising their anger or by withdrawing.

And usually the statements take a couple different forms. It can be in terms of judging. You're undisciplined. You're lazy. You're blah-blah-blah. Or controlling; you need to do this or you need to stop doing that. Or it can be punishing or it can be mudslinging or it can be throwing a tantrum.

There's a guy, Eric Berne, back in the '70s with his transactional analysis had this idea that we have three different roles that we assume in relationships: either it's the adult, the parent or the child. And for reactive couples, they keep on taking on the negative parent and the negative child role. And they're trying to either make their point or affect change or just to punish but it doesn't work. Only stepping back into the adult role actually works.

So if you're not making statements, the second tool is trying to stay with questions. With questions you're not trying to take control. You're not telling the other person what's going on; you're trying to find out what's going on. You're trying to explore the issue with them in a sincere, respectful way.

So there's a couple different reasons for questions. One is, if my partner's already assumed that I'm being a jerk, but I start coming back with these nice, sincere questions to actually show some respect for their upset and to get at the heart of it or resolve it, I'm giving them some contradictory information. I'm starting to show, well, if you're assuming I'm a jerk, I'm not really acting like a jerk. I'm showing you that I'm concerned enough to actually put your issues center stage and explore it with you. So it starts to work away at some of the assumptions.

But one of the biggest reasons for questions is that you can't fully think and feel at the same time. You have to do one or the other. In other words, if I give you a test to solve when you're angry, one of two things is going to happen: Either you're going to solve the test because you're able to push the anger into the background, or you're not going to be able to solve it because you stayed too upset and you couldn't think it through.

So the idea is with -- if you're asking good questions that actually gets your partner to think about what really is going on with me? What was so upsetting about that? Just by being engaged in thinking through some of that stuff, it moves them away from the emotion. It automatically starts to de-escalate some of the intensity of where they're typically going with it.

And there's some brain stuff that goes along with it. I mean, it's two different parts of your brain that are functioning.

Lee Rosen: That somehow makes you shift gears in some way.

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. Exactly. I mean, the details of it -- the old part of your brain, the reactive part that has the instinct and the primitive feeling is your limbic system, and the higher reasoning part where you do the thinking is the neocortex. But it's two different parts of your brain. And the only way the neocortex gets involved is if you give yourself - - or you give your partner time enough to actually engage the thinking part of their brain to get past all the emotion.

And for reactive couples, they never give enough time for that. They keep the emotions so stirred up that you always hear after the fact, "I don't know what I was thinking when I said that. I shouldn't have said that." But yeah, you weren't thinking; you were just feeling.

Lee Rosen: Well, I notice you said you've got to ask good questions. A question like, "Why are you so freakin' stupid?" probably wouldn't be --

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. "What's your problem?" Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. This tool could be manipulated by someone a little bit. But no, I hear you loud and clear and it makes a lot of sense that it really does change the dynamic. And I love that you're causing the person to use a different part of their brain and it does -- because it's so hard to get out of that reactive -- once you're in it and those chemicals are in your body I guess, or whatever it is, it's like it's just hard to shift gears. It's very hard.

Paul Schaffer: And some people will say, "Well, what if my partner's too upset to hear questions? When I keep putting questions out there, it just makes them angrier." But that's when you step back to a healthy exit. If they're too upset, then now's not the time. Step away.

Lee Rosen: Do it later.

Paul Schaffer: And come back later.

Lee Rosen: Right. Then everyone can respect that rule instead of chasing you through the house.

Paul Schaffer: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'm with you. Okay. Well, that one makes a lot of sense. So we started with the healthy exit. We moved on to this idea about questions or clarification. What's tool number three?

Paul Schaffer: Tool number three is restoring the benefit of the doubt. For a lot of couples the problem is that over time, because they assume that they know each other so well, they stop looking for information because they think they already have all the information that they need. So if my partner does something, I know exactly what they meant by that or what was going on with it, so I don't even need to ask them about it; I'll just go right to my conclusion or my assumption.

But often times, particularly for couples that have had this dysfunctional pattern, a lot of the reason they get so upset is when their partner's filling in the blanks for them they aren't getting it right. They're making assumptions that the other person didn't mean and so it's upsetting them all the more. But there's no room to correct it. And even if they do try to correct and explain themselves, the other partner hangs on to what was most hurtful or what feeds their fears the most rather than actually giving them the benefit of the doubt.

So the benefit of the doubt says that unless we're already really upset with each other, there's a number of different options for why my partner might have said or did what they did. And before I conclude exactly which one it was, I need to find out first. And I need to find out by stepping back to questions. I mean, to step back in terms of, "When you said that, what was it you meant? Where were you going with it? This is how I took it; is that correct?" If they say you're correct, then now we've got an issue and we can move on to process and issue.

But for most couples that have that dysfunctional pattern, probably at least 50 to 60 percent of their communication is all based on misunderstandings.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Because they're so quick to jump to these conclusions. Yeah. The dishes aren't done; it's because you're a crappy spouse, not because one of the kids had a bloody nose in the middle of when you were going to wash the dishes. Yeah.

Paul Schaffer: That's right. And for a lot of couples, they form what I call conspiracy theories, that they form what they -- they've got this picture of what their partner is about and so everything is fed into that theory.

If the theory is, "He really doesn't care that much about me," everything that he does is somehow going to get turned into, "Okay. This is just one more example of how he doesn't care." And it might just be he had a bad day at work or he's not really thinking right

now because he's not focused on talking with me, so he just said the first thing that popped into the top of his head.

There's so many other reasons why in any given moment a person does what they do. But if we're not still taking the time to actually communicate and explore those options then we have a very narrow field to choose from.

Lee Rosen: Okay. But sometimes we're not jumping the gun. We're not misinterpreting. We really do have a legitimate issue and so we've come to that conclusion. This is not me just believing all the old stuff about you; this is real this time. What's next? What's the next tool in your toolbox?

Paul Schaffer: Well, if you actually have an issue, if you've got it all kind of cleared out and I took it the way it was intended and now we've got a problem, there's really four steps to resolving any particular issue. And there's one big tool that I want you to get out of it.

The four steps are first somebody's got to identify what the issue is. Somebody's got to say, "Okay. I've got a problem and this is why."

There's a second step which is what most people skip and they go right on to the third step which is explaining. And the idea with explaining is that if I just give enough information to my partner's issue, that they'll drop the issue. If they just understood, there wouldn't be a problem. And they're trying to resolve it but they've got their ducks out of order.

So you see this pattern with couples where they go back and forth between his side/her side, one person trying to restate their issue in order to be heard and the other person restating their side of the issue and it keeps stalemating things. It keeps kind of canceling things out.

So the second step in the next tool is remembering to validate, and validation meaning showing respect for the partner's perspective. If my partner has an issue and I put them center stage and I just focus on understanding their issue before I step in with my stuff, it actually frees them up to be willing to hear my side. But if I just automatically move things to my part of it, I'm unintentionally invalidating what they have to say. So it moves them back into position again where they're feeling not heard so they're going to spend more time trying to be heard. And vice versa.

And it just gets back into this -- you see these couples having these marathon conversations that just added so much information trying

to make their case. And they're both exhausted and haven't resolved anything just because they've stockpiled so many issues now trying to present their side. But it's like where do you even begin?

So the idea of stepping out of that is somebody has to remember to put whoever brought up the issue first and spend time working through that.

Lee Rosen: So you sort of refer to this as validating the other person. So what would that look like as a practical -- give me an example conversation.

Paul Schaffer: Well, there's four different forms the validation can take. I mean, just listening, just not trying to step on or interrupt or move ahead my partner with their issue. Just giving them center stage and giving them some room to actually say what's on their mind and explore their issue a little bit without judging it, even if you don't agree with it. Agreement doesn't have anything to do with it. It's simply just trying to understand it is the first part of validation.

The second part is acknowledgement. Acknowledgement isn't agreement; it's simply saying, okay, if that's how you connected the dots, I can understand how you could come to that conclusion. It's still not saying that you agree with the logic but it's at least understanding. Because most people there's always a partial truth to what they say and you're trying to understand the logic behind what they're saying in words and be able to add more information to it that they can see the big picture.

But the third form of validation is apologizing. Apologizing isn't agreement; it's simply being able to say, "If I did something unintentional that still caused you pain, I'm sorry for the pain it caused. I'm sorry for the outcome, especially if it wasn't my intent."

Now, if it was my intent, you go to the fourth form of validation which is ownership. Ownership is simply being able to accept fault or blame. "You're right; I shouldn't have done that. My bad. I'll work at not doing that again," or moving on to talking about actual strategies you can try that will prevent it from happening again.

Lee Rosen: Terrific. So we've worked through four of the five tools. We're not done yet. Tool number five is -- help with that one. I know sometimes you see couples with problems that have been going on for a long time. And maybe both are contributing, maybe it's the fault of one spouse. How does tool number five come into play here?

Paul Schaffer: The idea of tool number five, it's called two-part solutions. Most couples get caught up in the blame game where, because you've lived together for any number of years or -- well, let's not even say that.

Usually if you've been in a relationship for any period of time, even if it's just been a couple months, anything your partner points out about you, you can point out something else about your partner. And so the blame game becomes this stalemate of each person pointing the finger at the other person.

So what usually draws people together at the beginning of the relationship is the acceptance that you show. But with the blame game, all you're showing is rejection. All you're showing is criticism. And so if couples hang onto the blame game, all they do is just push each other apart and they break apart the relationship.

But the idea of two-part solutions is that you're trying to approach things as a team. You're understanding that -- let's say I've got a problem with anger. And it is; it's mostly my problem. But there's still things that my partner does that helps or hinders that.

Lee Rosen: Like makes you angry.

Paul Schaffer: Especially with reactive couples because all their behavior depends on what the other person's doing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It's really the other person's fault, Paul. You're fine.

Paul Schaffer: So the idea of a two-part solutions is you're not assigning percentage of blame but you're looking at any problem in terms of what I need from my partner but what also I can do to help the situation. So it's joint ownership in trying to approach it more solution-focused than problem-obsessed.

A lot of it has to do with changing some of the language. Instead of looking at things in terms of right and wrong, it's look at things in terms of what works and what doesn't. What is it about how I express my anger? Because I need to be able to have freedom to be angry at times, but what is it that doesn't work for you about that? "Well, it's when you do this, this, this, and this." Okay. So what could I do instead that will work better for you when I am upset?

It just automatically steps things back to sharing information and looking at strategies rather than being so caught up in passing judgment on each other for not getting it right.

Lee Rosen: Right. You know, it strikes me listening to you that a lot of folks listening to this program are thinking, well, this is great but we have to both use these tools together. But the more I listen to you and the more I think about it, it seems like in an ideal world both spouses would agree to use the five tools. But even if you can't broach that topic, for whatever reason, or can't reach agreement, seems like just buying into this for yourself would cause a huge change in the relationship if you employed the five tools with no agreement from your spouse.

Paul Schaffer: Definitely. And a lot of people that's the problem is their rationale is, well, this isn't going to work because my partner's not going to use it. But you're right. It really doesn't -- ultimately that is the ideal, yeah. But at the beginning it really doesn't matter; it's just one person stepping out of that reactive cycle. It's just one person starting to do what's healthy for the relationship automatically narrows it down.

And it also kind of ends up putting up a mirror to the partner of, "Wait a minute, I'm the only who's losing it. I'm the only one when we get into these things and my partner's actually doing some nice things, now that I think about it." It may not happen immediately. It may not happen in that first argument or the second argument, but over time it becomes -- the awareness kind of grows that I'm the only person who's continuing to do the inappropriate things here, to do the things that really don't work.

And for a lot of people it is about modeling. Maybe they didn't grow up in a family that modeled healthy resolution. So now that at least I've got one person in the relationship who's doing something healthy for us, maybe I can start paying attention to that. Maybe there's something they actually have to add to the picture here that I can learn from that -- and it starts to bring the couple back in that way if one person's willing to actually let the other person do a little bit of education.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, we talked a little bit about your first book, *Conflict Resolution for Couples*. If I wanted to get a copy of that would I just go to your website? Is that at RightChoicesCounseling.com? Is that the best way to do it?

Paul Schaffer: Probably the best way is through Amazon.com.

Lee Rosen: Amazon, okay.

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. Amazon.com or actually -- probably the least expensive way is to go directly to the publisher, which is Author House.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Paul Schaffer: AuthorHouse.com, since it's directly through the publisher, believe it or not is actually a less expensive way to go. But it's also available through Amazon. And you can order it through book stores as well.

Lee Rosen: Okay. We'll put a link to it in the show notes. Now, you have another book in the works, right?

Paul Schaffer: Yeah. There's a book I've been sitting on for about a year now called *Any Marriage's Essential Top 10*. And the last show I'd gone into a little bit of detail on the 10 different -- at least 5 of the 10 different points. But, yeah. And it's really just a summary of the 10 most common factors that I keep running into with dysfunctional relationships. It's kind of a field book, as far as I'm concerned, for relationships. It's kind of the ideal thing for couples that are looking at just getting married and giving them a nice little field manual of things to pay attention to at the get-go.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, Paul, thank you so much for sharing the tools with us today. I think you've given us some material here that we can really use to make our marriages work better. Thanks so much.

Paul Schaffer: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Lee Rosen: You can find out a whole lot more about Paul and his counseling services for couples and for individuals at his website, and I will put a link to that in the show notes. It's RightChoicesCounseling.com. Or you can call his office at (704) 578-2725.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you've enjoyed it. We will be back again next week. In the meantime, if you have feedback, questions, comments, any input at all, we love to hear it. I am so grateful for all of the feedback that we get.

Our comment line is at (919) 256-3083. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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