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The Keys to a New Intimacy

This Stay Happily Married #126, "The Keys to a New Intimacy."

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 and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here today with two guests: Dr. Judith Sherven and Dr. Jim Sniechowski. They're a husband-and-wife relationship and psychology team who are celebrating their 22nd wedding anniversary this year. Together they're the best-selling authors of five relationship books, including *Be Loved for Who You Really Are* and *The Smart Couple's Guide to the Wedding of Your Dreams*. They've been featured, gosh, everywhere, all kinds of programs, publications, everything from *Opera* to *The View*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Cosmo*. I mean, you name it, they've been in it.

They're going to talk to us about the keys they found to creating a lasting emotional intimacy, both through their research and through the success of their own marriage.

Judith, Jim, welcome to the show. How are you all today?

Jim Sniechowski: Thank you, Lee. We're fine. Thank you.

Judith Sherven: Thanks, Lee. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am excited to have you here today and talking about the keys to a new intimacy. You know, one thing that we see a lot of, and I'm a little baffled by it, but why do so many people these days abandon might really be a good relationship and they could make it work, I think? What do you all think about that?

Judith Sherven: Well, we see it the same way you do, Lee, which is that most people have received no preparation for what a good, real romantic marriage can be. And so too often they are filled with fantasies from romance novels, the movies, ideas their friends have. And so when they get into a real relationship and they're married and the realities of life in terms of the bills and the economy and children and in-laws, you name it, start to come in on them, they don't have the skills; they aren't prepared. And the fantasy is, if I were with someone else, this wouldn't be happening.

And so they bail out, believing that it's just a matter of finding someone else. And as we all know, then they find somebody else and repeat the same old pattern again.

Lee Rosen: Do it all over again. Yeah. Well, so if we roll back the clock to the beginning of these marriages, what would you see as the most important key to really being ready for a successful marriage?

Jim Sniechowski: Well, Lee, what I'm going to say may sound trivial but it's really quite profound. And the key to a successful marriage is understanding that the other person is not you. What I mean by that is of course one's male, one's female; one is tall, one is short; one is this, one is that. And you might say, "Of course the other person's not you."

But what we mean by that is coming to the understanding that the other person has their own way of looking at things, has their own attitudes, has their own desires and hopes. And it's not that you two can't work together, but what most people do is they go into a relationship narcissistically. Innocently narcissistically.

And the assumption that occurs thereafter -- or the result that occurs thereafter -- is that they think, unconsciously, that the other person's behavior is weird, strange, threatening, or whatever, because they really don't understand that the other person is really a different world, a different being. And in order to have a relationship, they have to get to know one another as other people.

And that's why we say there is magic in the differences between two people. Not just the differences in the common sense of, "Oh, well, you've having differences," meaning you're having conflict; but differences in a positive sense, so that both people can really understand in the relationship that they're being loved for who they really are.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so there's a lot of blame that goes on when you don't understand that other person and so you end up -- everything is their fault. Nothing is your fault.

Jim Sniechowski: Right.

Lee Rosen: And all of that. I hear a lot from people that they're sort of the -- I guess they're sort of the victim of their spouse, that things didn't go well and there's a lot of blame of their spouse. Is it usually that one spouse is sort of the victim of the behavior of the other spouse? Is it usually that clear-cut or is it fuzzier than that?

Judith Sherven: Oh, it's lots fuzzier than that, Lee. The fact is that there really are never any real victims in a marriage because the fact is that from the minute the two people met, they have been teaching each other what they want, what they don't want, what they'll put up with, what they won't put up with.

And the passive partner can feel especially victimized because in their fantasy world the other person should just know what they want, should just know how to behave in a kind and sweet manner. But they don't realize that they are with every breath of silence not speaking up for what they need or not speaking up to protest against bad treatment. They don't understand that they are very much 50 percent participation in that marriage.

So one of Jim's and my agendas in talking with men and women about their relationships is to understand they are always a full participant. And therefore, they need to develop really good relationship skills and to understand how love is always leading them to learn better and better how to be a full participant -- in other words, a full self -- in the relationship. And that's really part of what relationship provides is a soul school for learning all of that.

Lee Rosen: Right. And then there are no victims if you do it your way. Absolutely makes sense.

Something you guys say in the materials for your book is that you say there's a special aphrodisiac that most couples overlook. When I saw that, I knew I had to ask you about it because I want to know about all aphrodisiacs. What is it and tell me how that's working for the people reading your materials, that you're working with, and for you in your marriage. I need to know about all aphrodisiacs.

Jim Sniechowski: Well, of course most people think an aphrodisiac is something you're either going to sip or smoke, but that's not what we mean.

The aphrodisiac we're talking about is curiosity. Genuine, sincere curiosity.

And think about it, Lee. If you and I are in a relationship just, say, as friends, and we're having a cup of coffee somewhere or a cup of whatever, and I really, really wanted to know about you. I'm curious about you. I don't take you for granted. I ask you questions. I'm delighted with you or I argue with you. The arguing is just another way of acknowledging that I see you and we're having a difference, but it's not negative. And I really, really, really want to know who you are. That is a real turn-on.

And as we work with people -- and in our own relationship as well -- the aphrodisiac is multi-dimensional. It is not just sexual. It is emotional. It is spiritual. It is existential in the sense that I am actually being found attractive for who I am, for my being, for my behavior. And that level of curiosity will make sex -- which most people link with aphrodisiacs -- that level of curiosity will deepen and make sex so much more pleasurable because it's actually with me and they're interested in me and vice versa.

Judith Sherven: And Lee, I want everybody listening to hear this. Jim and I met on a blind date nearly 23 years ago. And we've been married, as you said, 22 years. And we have never been bored with each other ever.

And we talk about it and we remark on the fact that most people at the time of 22 years worth of marriage are struggling with feeling bored. And very often it inspires a jump off into either a sexual affair or, for some people, they just decide they might as well get divorced and move on to somebody else.

But when you are sincerely curious about the other person and you are available for the other person to be curious about you, you're continually learning about each other. There's always more to explore. There's always a new question on the dock. There's always something new to go play out in the world, some new place to go on the weekend, etc.

So we really want to infuse in everyone's consciousness how powerful an aphrodisiac curiosity can be when you do not take for granted your relationship, the other person, or yourself; and you constantly explore, what does it mean to be together and what does it mean to be who the two of you are?

Jim Sniechowski: And what does it mean to be you?

Lee Rosen: Well, in the abstract that sounds terrific, but 23 years of Jim. How do you keep interested?

Jim Sniechowski: Well, Lee, you've got to know me.

Judith Sherven: Let me give you a good example. Jim's doctorate is in psychology and philosophy. And so we both share the psychology part and we certainly explore that to some degree. But one of the places where I'm continually curious about Jim is his exploration of philosophy, his exploration of the meaning of life day to day. Not off in the cosmos, but day to day what is the meaning of life?

And I don't take for granted that he's more interested in that at a philosophical level than I am. And I learn from him as he tells me this or I ask him about that or we take a look at someone else's life and how they've let themselves become bored because they're not addressing the meaning of their life; they're just caught in a 9-to-5, go home, eat dinner with the family, watch television, go to bed, and start all over again the next day.

So that's just one tiny little glimpse into what keeps me continually interested and curious about Jim and his continual exploration of that issue.

Jim Sniechowski: Lee, we say that the sweetest, deepest, and most lasting intimacy -- and by intimacy I mean emotional, intellectual, spiritual, existential, soulful intimacy -- is found in the differences between two people.

A couple of fundamental points. If I am imposing on you or expecting from you behaviors that I consider appropriate, then in fact you are psychologically invisibilized. And if I say to you in the process, "I really like you. I respect you. I love you," you have no idea whether I'm really talking about you because the "you" that exists is the "you" that I am creating and imposing on the relationship.

Then, taking it in the other direction, when you open that up and let the other person not be you, then it behooves you -- if you want to stay in the relationship and, as Judith said, not be bored -- to find out who that other person is.

Now, Judith, on the other hand, she is as tactical as they come. So sometimes I will be off in lofty abstractions, which I just love. And abstractions are not necessarily -- I want to make a point here -- aren't necessarily devoid of life; they're just a way of looking at life.

And Judith will look at me and she will turn it into something that happened to her today or yesterday or a friend happened or whatever. And she's busy. She's like an engineer. She applies these things in life and I get to see how what I am doing -- which is without an intention of application, just exploration -- gets applied in life. So that in our work together I create the concepts, I develop the concepts, and then I turn it over to her to tell all the stories. And that's how we can work together and over all of these years never stay bored.

Lee Rosen: Right. Perfect match. Or at least, you've made it a perfect match. You said something --

Jim Sniechowski: Yeah. There are no such things as soul mates on the first date.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jim Sniechowski: That is really baloney. Soul mates can meet but then soulmateship is something that has to be developed and has to evolve over time. If you meet your soul mate on the first date, you're effectively looking in a mirror.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That absolutely sounds accurate from my experiences.

You said something a few minutes ago about arguing -- or fighting. And that is an inevitable, I suppose, part of every relationship. But in your book you really talk about embracing conflict, not turning away from it. What do you mean by that and why would I want to embrace conflict?

Jim Sniechowski: Well, first of all, we're going to tell you to embrace conflict but not in the sense that most people think. So let me just back up and say you use the word "inevitable." Conflicts are inevitable. Two people can't live together in the intimacy of a living-together relationship and not occasionally bump into each other and not occasionally bump into each other rather severely. And people step on each other's toes, metaphorically. They crash into each other. That will happen.

If it doesn't happen, then both people are so passive that their relationship will eventually die. And that's, again, the two people who are in their 70s sitting at lunch some place and spend an entire hour at lunch and don't ever talk to each other, which is a death sentence.

But what we mean by "embrace conflict" is this. Conflict is when two people are talking about the same point, under the assumption

that they're both coming at it from the same point of view, and they're not. So what happens is that you end up -- most people who don't know how to handle conflict end up struggling with each other, trying to win the contest. And the worst thing you can do is defeat your spouse because that's a soul death.

So what we mean by "embrace" is conflict is a spiritual spur to grow the -- let's call it the geography of your relationship. When you get into a conflict, and you actually resolve the conflict between the two of you so that both of you are mutually satisfied with the resolution, your relationship has grown. There's more territory. There's more space that can allow you to breathe.

Because a conflict exists at the edge -- right at the edge of where you've done your relationship exploration and you need to push out beyond it. If you had pushed out beyond it, there would be no conflict. So that's what the conflict is telling you. It's a time to grow.

Judith Sherven: And also, Lee and everyone listening, if there's no conflict -- because there's some couples that pride themselves in "we've never had an argument." Well, if you've never had an argument, then one or both of you is not showing up fully in the relationship. Because certainly there are going to be instances where two people live together when somebody wants to go to Hawaii for vacation and somebody else wants to go to Costa Rica for vacation. And it's not easily resolved with just a snap of the fingers of, "Oh, well, okay. I'll just give up and go to Hawaii with you," If both of you are really fully showing up.

Because as soon as you just give up on Costa Rica, you've just given up on who you are and been allowed to subsume yourself into your spouse. And now your spouse has less of you to love. And we don't want that for you.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jim Sniechowski: And when you have that Hawaii/Costa Rica metaphorical argument and you actually get into the depths of it, what do you want from Hawaii? What do I want from Costa Rica? What is important here? Very often you can come with a third alternative that neither of you had discussed or even imagined beforehand that will satisfy the both of you and resolve the situation.

Lee Rosen: Wow. That's a lot to take in. You know, one of the things that you said in there is about beating your spouse in the argument, and that's a very tough one for me. As a lawyer -- and I don't know, chicken or the egg; are you a lawyer because you like to win

arguments or do you like to win arguments because you're a lawyer? And I'm not married to a lawyer. I know a lot of lawyers who are. I think that's really tough. But, yeah, to not win that argument and beat your spouse is a hard urge I think for some of us to overcome.

You two have worked with hundreds and hundreds of couples and you've learned -- you've shared with us I think a lot of things you've learned from those people. But what are the other keys, you think, to a happy marriage? What else have you learned that we really need to know?

Judith Sherven: I think to answer that question, number one would be you have to be available to receive. In any meaningful relationship, and most especially a marriage that goes on for years and years and years, that if you are not open to receiving, you're going to miss out on a lot.

Jim and I saw it over and over again when we were in private practice for dozens of years and doing workshops, the difficulty that people had receiving anything from a compliment to a gift to an invitation to run out and grab a quick hamburger. The difficulty people have of noticing all the little minor and major moments when the spouse is giving you their love in a myriad of ways. And if you aren't available to receive it then it passes you by.

When Jim and I were first married, we were driving along and I had my hand on Jim's leg. And I said, "Are you feeling this?" And he said, "What?" I said, "Are you feeling my hand?" And he said, "Oh, no, no, no. I was trying to figure out where we're going."

Now, we realized right in that moment Jim was going to need to pay closer attention to when I was being affectionate in that kind of every day way. You're driving along; you put your hand on your spouse's leg. But if he doesn't notice, he's missing. And then I'm not being recognized for my gift. And that's just a tiny, tiny, little example of how people miss out on receiving so much that's available for them if they're conscious and awake and aware and taking it in.

Jim Sniechowski: And Lee, love is both an experience that we conduct and love is an experience that leads us. Very often, letting love lead is really critical in a relationship. And the reason I say that is in receiving. If you're going to be open to receive inherently and de facto, that means you are open to the possibility of being changed.

Because when she put her hand on my leg and I said, "No, I don't" -
- and as a matter of fact, that whole incident arose because when I

said to her one time, "I touch you more than you touch me." She said, "No, you don't." And I said, "Yes, I do." And she said, "No, you don't." I said, "You're going to have to prove that to me." And that moment driving along was her expression of that and suddenly I had to change. My position had to shift. But that also allows me to grow.

And Judith mentioned that you miss out on stuff. Well, that's true. But more importantly and more deeply is that receiving is about allowing yourself to become who you are not by the influence of the one that you're with.

So for example, you talked about winning an argument. Well, let's just say in your situation where you are open to receiving the possibility that the other person -- in this case your wife -- has a point of view that is not only valid but may actually be more accurate or on point than yours, you have to change. And it's the change that most people have difficulty with in relationships.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very good advice. We've covered a lot of ground here today. Are there resources that our listeners ought to know about, things that you guys know about that might be helpful to us to check out?

Judith Sherven: We would recommend a program that Jim and I created to help people really understand the power and the beauty of love. And we call it Letting Love Lead, because so often people get into a relationship and they try to control the relationship and suck the life out of it and suck the love out of it. And instead, we want to encourage people to let love lead them so that they can have a more robust and exciting relationship. And they can get the program at JudithAndJim.com/LettingLoveLead.

Jim Sniechowski: Letting Love Lead, of course, is all one word. JudithAndJim.com/LettingLoveLead.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Terrific. Well, I want to check that out. I have not looked at that yet, so I'll be doing that as soon as we wrap up here today.

Judith and Jim, I cannot tell you how appreciative I am for you being willing to join us here today. Thank you so much.

Judith Sherven: Thank you, Lee.

Jim Sniechowski: And Lee, thank you for the work that you do.

Lee Rosen: Well, we're happy to help. It's important work and we're excited to be a part of it.

You all can check out the website. As was mentioned, it's at JudithAndJim.com. And get information about all of their books and all of the resources, links to everything, articles. Terrific website.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we are getting so many great comments, so much feedback from you. We answer it all. We love to hear from you. Couple of ways you can reach us. Our comment line is at (919) 256-3083. And you can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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