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## Talk to Me Like I'm Someone You Love

*This is Stay Happily Married #141, "Talk to Me Like I'm Someone You Love."*

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Ned Daze:

I'm Ned Daze and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Does it ever feel like even when the fights between you and your partner are over things just aren't really resolved and you feel like you aren't connecting? Well, I'm here with Dr. Nancy Dreyfus, who will help us explain why superficial resolutions don't really fix the underlying problems. And she has an approach that she says is often quicker and that will actually give you the right words to connect with your spouse, even during the worst arguments.

Nancy is a psychotherapist and a couples therapist with over 25 years of experience and she is the author of *Talk to Me Like I'm Someone You Love*, which we'll be talking about today. This is a really unique book and it's a relationship tool that can really help partners with arguments express their feelings and their needs in a productive way.

Nancy, welcome to the show. So glad you could join us.

Nancy Dreyfus:

Oh, thank you. It's nice to meet you, Ned.

Ned Daze:

Excellent. Wonderful to meet you too. I'm real excited about talking to this. I think this is really kind of a unique book you've written and that it really functions very well as a tool during arguments, which I think a lot of other books -- people kind of come to them after they've had an argument, or maybe before they've had an

argument; but this kind of seems like one that can really be used in the thick of things. Am I kind of correct about that?

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, that's exactly what it is. And maybe I ought to go into the description of what it is.

It is a series of what we call flash cards for real life; that right in the midst of an upset, when the person in front of you is seeming completely impossible, if not insane, you hold up a written message that might say something to them like, "This feels awful. Can we start again and really listen to each other?" Or, "I'm afraid if I say I'm sorry I'll make everything all your fault."

But a written message sometimes can get through when a verbal one cannot.

Ned Daze: Right. I've got to be honest. It sounds like a great idea to me just because I don't have to think up things to say; I can just pull them straight from the book. I know that seems a little selfish. And we'll talk about that because I think to some extent that's almost a benefit in some way.

But we were talking a little bit earlier how a lot of this kind of revolves around when we have arguments, we kind of get these solutions to them that you talk about as being superficial. And I kind of want you to explain a little bit about what you mean by that. I kind of think, oh, well, an argument's resolved or it isn't. But tell me what we mean when we're talking about --

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, let me just say something. I don't think there's anything that's actually resolving anything superficially. It's making nice. It's walking on eggshells. It's denial. It's pretending it's not there. So let me give you an example of what typically happens. And I can actually speak about something that happened here today with a client.

It's snowing in Philadelphia and a married couple -- the wife comes in and she had told her teenage boys that they could play video games. And the husband, to his credit, did not countermand her, didn't tell the boys to do something else, but came to the wife and said, "We're not raising upstanding citizens. Those boys should be out there shoveling." What couples typically -- and they got into it, sort of a fight.

And what typically happens in a situation like this, the wife will give in or she will say "screw you." And what both people need to do in that moment is to really listen to what the feelings are that each

other is having and to understand why they would take the position that they were taking, rather than just do something at gunpoint.

And I will say something -- and this is my opinion; I'm speaking as a clinician -- that those boys listening to their parents talk sanely to each other, that is going to contribute more to their maturity than whether they shovel the lawn or not.

I'm going to give you one more example about what you said about a superficial resolution. Last week I had a couple come in where the wife had been concerned about her husband's drinking at a party. And to get support, she called a friend who actually had been an alcoholic in recovery to complain about the husband's drinking. And to her surprise, the friend who had been at the party said, "You know what? I didn't really think he was drinking too much. He was conducting himself well. This is really your issue."

The wife goes back to the husband and says, "I have some interesting news for you. I was complaining about you to Jane and Jane actually told me I'm making too big of an issue about it," thinking the husband would be thrilled. But all the husband heard was that something private about them had been discussed with a third party. So here she thought that she was going to be giving him a gift and all he heard of was that he didn't even want his drinking discussed with a third party.

What do you do in a situation like that? If she just said to him, "You're right; I shouldn't have told her," something isn't getting resolved. Both of them have to hear each other's feelings. She has to hear that he felt that his privacy was compromised, and he has to hear that her intentions were trying to get clarification about something and feeling she was giving him something. Does that make sense?

Ned Daze: Right. It does. But kind of the way it was carried out, both people are kind of on the defensive after that, right?

Nancy Dreyfus: Exactly. And that brings us to my book and what the power of written messages are. And I want to really be clear. I have a little bit of my author's investment in this, but this is not like some kind of gimmick, like soup being packaged in a new container. It's a whole different way about thinking about a relationship.

When we are in a mode with our partner where we're defended, something called our fight-or-flight response gets activated. And what we are doing in that moment is scanning for danger, which is

why arguments are so hard to resolve, because we are actually looking to see where things are unsafe.

So when my fight-or-flight response is activated and you say to me, "You know, Nancy, I'm really sorry," I am going to hear the 3 percent of exasperation in your voice and I'm not going to hear the 97 percent sincerity.

So the value of showing a written message is that we go right to the heart of really connecting with each other with a lot more safety and optimism.

Ned Daze: Right. And you know, I was going to ask you, what prompted you to write this book? And you kind of explained that a little bit. And I want to kind of go into more detail. We talked about the kind of flash card aspect of it before. And these are basically -- you've got some statements in here that you suggest you show to your spouse during an argument, correct?

Nancy Dreyfus: Yep. Well, let me tell you how the book came about. A number of years ago I was in a couples session with a couple that actually reminded me of my own parents. We don't become couples therapists for no reason. And I grew up with a lot of fighting and a lot of screaming.

And I am in a session with a couple; the wife was screaming at the husband and calling him asinine, which was one of my mother's favorite words for my father. And I went into what's called a counter-transference trance. I was almost mute. Like, I was an 11-year-old at home, unable to mediate between my parents.

And in a moment of either desperation or inspiration, I leaned over and on a scrap piece of paper I wrote, "Talk to me like I'm someone you love." And I gave it to the battered husband and I whispered to him, "Hold it up to her."

And he held it up to her and in a flash -- the subtitle of my book is "Relationship Repair in a Flash" -- in a flash this woman pivoted 180 degrees, could feel self-respect in him holding up the message, and just said to him, "I haven't been treating you very well, have I?" And they walked out of the office. And I thought to myself, oh, my god.

What I didn't know at the time, Ned, was that probably the greatest couples researcher on the planet, an amazing man named John Gottman in Seattle, who wires couples up and sees their bodily reactions to each other and has studied more couples than anyone

on the planet, basically what he said that one of the signs of a happy couple is that in the midst of an argument they still retain some warmth with each other.

So they could be fighting and one of them says to the other something seemingly lame -- "Honey, I know this is hard to hear," or, "Calm down; we'll get over this soon" -- something relational in the midst of an argument transforms the experience and makes it much less scary.

Ned Daze: That's a pretty amazing example. And it's interesting, we talk about this and I think the written aspect of this is really important. These aren't things to memorize and then just bring up during conversation. The written aspect is really kind of the key to this, right?

Nancy Dreyfus: I would say so. Now, let me say, if people read my book and they're more adept at making "I" statements and going vulnerable in the midst of an argument verbally, I'm going to say that I'm still performing my soul's mission.

Ned Daze: Right.

Nancy Dreyfus: But what the written message does -- I like to call it next generation self-help. A lot of people understand that making "I" statements and being vulnerable is the thing to do, even I who teach this stuff. But sometimes it is very hard in the trenches to pivot. There's a whole issue of shame and saving face and having dug your heels in and needing to turn around. And there is something about taking the moment, going to get the book, giving something to your partner and having them receive it that's truly like introducing a face-saving white flag right in the midst of an upset.

And I like to tell people that corny as it sounds, giving and receiving are the building blocks of love. And the flash card, if you really think about it, in the midst of everything I'm giving something to you. And unless your partner is a psychopath, your partner receives it and gets that it's a friendly gesture.

Isn't the truth that under every argument, no matter what the content is, all I'm really wanting is to feel close to you? I'm wanting to feel seen. I'm wanting to feel heard. We're fighting because we feel something that's part of our connection has been challenged. So I say, why not get back to it quickly?

Ned Daze: Right. I think that's really wonderful that you do have a physical thing you can give to somebody right in the middle of this

argument. And that really kind of cements the whole idea, doesn't it?

Nancy Dreyfus: Mm-hmm.

Ned Daze: That's pretty amazing. And so I want to know, is this how you suggest using it, during a fight? A couple's having a fight, I'm sitting here arguing with my spouse. Do I just kind of put everything on hold, go to the bookshelf, grab the book and then turn to the page I want and hand it to my spouse?

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, that's sort of the Cliffs Notes. But let me say something in a little more detail.

Ned Daze: Yeah.

Nancy Dreyfus: First of all, what I recommend is that when people get the book that they read through it when they're feeling calm. And what people typically say when they read this book, almost always, is why didn't anyone dream this up before? And they say, by god, that would have been handy last week when. And if anybody here has ever been in a relationship, you know that what would have been handy last week will be handy tomorrow because we have the same arguments over and over again.

So you underline or you tab or you have certain messages available to you that you know will work. And what you do is the person who is sanest in the moment -- we both are a little insane. The person who is sanest in the moment, the person who's most mature, simply makes a decision; I want to do something different.

I cannot tell you, Ned, all the people who say to me, in the midst of an argument when I'm upset I'm going to go get this book? Get real. And what I say to them -- I say a few things to them. I say to them, think of all the hours you have spent processing, complaining, paying money to therapists, thinking you finished the argument and five minutes later having one more thing to say, and you won't spend 90 seconds to go do something that could transform something? I say, get real.

When you go to Starbucks -- this is a little planned, I will admit, because people ask me this all the time. When you go to Starbucks, you often will wait five or six minutes for your latte. If you go to an ATM machine and there are two people ahead of you and you need money, you don't say, okay, I don't think I'm going to wait.

So I invite anybody listening to this to actually take in the stunning fact of the amount of mediocrity -- I was about to say junk -- but the mediocrity that you're willing to accept in your relationship and you wouldn't do something that would be a minute or two that could give you both an experience of warmth and healing?

Ned Daze: Right. That is pretty amazing. I hadn't even thought about it that way. But you're right.

Nancy Dreyfus: It's amazing. And you know what? Even as these elegant words come out of my mouth -- and I'm a wordsmith, you know. I'm a former journalist and I've been a therapist now 30 years. I love words. I love language. When I get triggered, it's not like these words sometimes always immediately come to me because, like anybody else -- you've already heard about my childhood background. I'm wounded. I'm reactive. My partner's reactive.

And I'll just share something. Over our bed he has actually framed two flash cards over our bed that we can just point to. One of them is, "Right now I don't need a lecture; I need your love." And the other one is, "You have no idea how much I regret the direction I've taken this in." And I'd like anybody listening to this to imagine that if they flashed those messages to their partner or their partner flashed those messages to them, would there be any doubt that it wouldn't move it into a friendlier place?

Ned Daze: Right. And I wanted to talk a little bit about what some of these messages are and how you came to them. I want to mention your website. I'll mention it now and then again at the end of the show. It's [NancyDreyfus.com](http://NancyDreyfus.com). Because you've actually got some example cards you can download right there on the site, correct?

Nancy Dreyfus: I can. If people leave their e-mail address, they can actually download the title card, "Talk to me like I'm someone you love," and two others; they shift from time to time. And there's actually an audio demo of a couple having a fight.

Two clients of mine simulated a real fight that actually had occurred where one of them got angry at the other because they left a wallet on top of the car. And the wife is trying to tell the husband how great it was that a roadside worker traveled six miles to return her wallet when it fell off the car. All the husband was doing was screaming at why did you leave your wallet on top of the car? It's a kind of typical thing.

So if you go to [NancyDreyfus.com](http://NancyDreyfus.com) you can get a lot more information, as well as some real sample flash cards to practice on.



Ned Daze: Excellent. Yeah. So what are just a couple of these ideas that you put on the cards? And what made you create these ideas? What were the inspiration for all the various cards you've got in here?

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, I would say that some of them came from my own personal experience in relationship, that anybody who becomes a bit of a zealot and a crusader, like I am, has had to learn it the hard way. So to notice what sort of things would melt me or melt my partner. As well as being a couples therapist for many years, simply noticing what kind of statements, often very simple ones, make a difference.

A popular flash card is one that just says, "I don't feel heard." Think of trying to scream to get your partner's attention. And imagine simply holding up a simple message, "I don't feel heard." Four words. "I don't feel heard." And just holding it up and getting to see that when your partner is seeing that all you want is to be heard, everything shifts. You're not trying to make them wrong. You're not trying to prove that you're smarter than they are.

I'll share with you what some of my favorites are. I like this one, number six, "I have no idea what to do right now, except to tell you I'm in a lot of pain. I know you are too and I want it to be friendlier between us."

Another one, "I wish you could hear this. It's me saying yes to myself, not no to you." And boy, is that a popular one.

What I want to say is in the book there's the flash card on the left-hand side of the page, and on the right-hand side of the page there's an explanation about how to use it. And I'm going to read just a little that comes from flash card number three, "I wish you could hear this. It's me saying yes to myself, not no to you," because it says a lot about the book.

"The reason we don't have a flash card in the book that just says, 'Please don't take this personally,' is because it would be a wasted card. Almost no one knows how to not take it personally." And that's what you need to realize in human relations.

So what the book is attempting to do by so clearly giving partners "I" statements where you're talking about yourself, often your own predicament about relating, it breaks your relationship out of what we call a negative trance.

When a couple is fighting -- let's say -- think of hypnotism. We are in a negative trance. We are now believing that this person is our



enemy and not our friend, and that everything that comes out of our mouth follows after that. But if in the midst of this I hold up a card that says, "I feel like a total and complete idiot," or 36, "Do you hate me?" or 41, "I realize I'm overreacting; can you give me a minute to get sane again?" everything shifts.

And I want to say this without a doubt. If I had to give one thing to any couple about what could shift something the most quickly, it's not saying, "I love you." We've over-heard "I love you." Sometimes it's the perfect thing to say, but not all the time.

If you want to say one thing to your partner that will stop them in their tracks, all you have to do is say, "I know I've been crazy." Why? Because up until that point you've been trying to get your partner to see that they're being crazy. And often when people are fighting they're never fighting about what the obvious ostensible subject is; they're actually fighting for their version of reality.

So anybody listening to this, take your last fight. What would it have meant to you if your partner had said, "I realize I'm being a little crazy"? Everything would have softened.

Ned Daze: Yeah. It's pretty amazing. It really does kind of paint a whole new picture of how this works in terms of really cooling things down with your spouse.

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, I say to people, we all know how quickly we can go from cozy to crazy. You can be -- I hear this all the time; I've experienced it -- you could be in an amazing, loving space with your partner. It feels like you're in bliss and it will never stop.

And suddenly you say something and your partner misses the point or interrupts or, as is frequently the case, picks up their cell phone or Blackberry right in the midst of your speaking. And suddenly what you thought was a divine union is starting to feel questionable to you and you feel dropped. You feel left; particularly if you've been in a blissful space.

And it happens over and over again. We've gone from cozy to crazy and the partner says, "I just picked up the cell phone." But how it's feeling to the first person isn't that you just picked up the cell phone; it's that you're making something more important than me or more important than bliss.

So the interesting question for me, out of which this book is a reflection, is if we can go so quickly, Ned, from cozy to crazy, maybe there's a way we can go back from crazy to cozy.

Oh, I forgot the most important thing. We have to get voice tone out of the way. Actually, I mentioned that earlier. Voice tone's the killer.

Ned Daze: Right. Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about that because I think you were talking about the 97 percent and 3 percent in terms of when you're saying something to your spouse.

Nancy Dreyfus: Right.

Ned Daze: Yeah. Talk to me about that a little more.

Nancy Dreyfus: What we want to feel -- and this is why the written message is so powerful -- all we're wanting to feel is sincerity. Sincerity is our drug of choice, as well it should be. It's what we should want. And one of the flash cards I really love is, "What can I say that would make you feel understood?"

But 99 percent of the time, if one of us was to flash it to each other in the midst of an upset it would -- actually, speak it, not flash it -- it would come across, "Okay. So what can I say that would make you feel understood?" And so we're no longer feeling that someone really cares what we're feeling. We're feeling like they're wanting to shut us up. So that voice tone -- if we can eliminate voice tone, what you get to see is how much you really, really want to trust your partner.

I said before, and again, I'm a romantic, so I love to be told, "I love you." And there's some book out there somewhere that's called *Three Little Words*. I once saw it many years ago. And you think that the three little words to create a wonderful relationship are "I love you." But actually, the three little words -- and I regret I did not make this as a flash card -- is, "Is there more?"

Giving a tip -- because this is about staying married and wanting to really do right by your relationship -- when your partner complains to you -- this is particularly true if men want to dazzle their wives, because men tend to get flooded and overwhelmed by a lot of female emotion.

When your wife complains about something or seems upset, rather than saying, "Are you done yet?" or "I've heard enough," you say to her, "Is there more?" You will have a very, very happy partner. Because the metamessage -- the underlying message is, I want you to really feel heard and seen; I don't want to shut you up.

Ned Daze: Right. Yeah, it is pretty amazing. Just the small change really disarms the whole statement, doesn't it? Very interesting.

Well, I guess is there anything else we haven't touched on about the book that we need to cover?

Nancy Dreyfus: Well, there's one more thing that I would like to touch on because I just feel it's such an interesting piece of information that's relevant to all this.

Ned Daze: Yeah.

Nancy Dreyfus: And I think relevant is some gender differences that are kind of apparent and sometimes have been satirized. There are differences between men and women. And I am here to report that in the last few years there's been extraordinary research done on infants two and three months old who are put in what's called a maternal stress situation. The mother is holding the child tenderly and abruptly puts the infant down.

In 99 percent of the cases, baby girls feel fear. In other words, it's anxiety; who's going to take care of me? So they have anxiety over attachment. Prepare yourself for what baby boys feel. In 98-99 percent of the cases, a baby boy will experience shame.

What God had in mind I can't even begin to fathom, Ned. But imagine what that means if a two, three-month-old baby boy is already feeling "what's wrong with me" and the mother puts him down abruptly.

You can understand what is going on with men when they seem overloaded or flooded and can no longer listen to a woman's complaint. He's not thinking she wants to be heard; he's thinking, "What's wrong with me?"

And any smart woman listening to this should take this into account when she sees her husband as less than engaged. He is protecting himself from feeling diminished.

Ned Daze: Right. Well, it kind of goes back to what we were talking about a little bit earlier about the phrase "Don't take this personally," and how we're almost hard-wired to take everything personally right off the bat, it sounds like.

Nancy Dreyfus: Yes. And typically what happens is men tend to take things personally, immediately hear that they're not feeling respected or

valued. And women can often hear things in terms of feeling that they're being abandoned.

And it's not easy. I am the first to say -- might joke, but it's not a joke -- is that it's 800 percent easier -- I'm writing a couples -- a conflict repair book -- than it is being part of a relationship. And I just want to say this to everybody.

When you look at other couples and you think they have it so much easier than you, they don't. Not if there's any authenticity in the relationship. If you have two people with some integrity who are really struggling to be heard and seen, there is going to be conflict, there's going to be stepping on each other's toes. And I would have to say marriage is worth it and it's not for the faint-hearted.

Ned Daze: Right. Fantastic. Well, Nancy, I can't thank you enough for joining us today. I really appreciate you taking time to talk with us on the show.

Nancy Dreyfus: Oh, it's my pleasure.

Ned Daze: Excellent. And again, Nancy's the author of *Talk to Me Like I'm Someone You Love*. This is a really great resource. We've been talking about it here for the past half hour and just a really terrific thing. I think this is a really unique book that you can use to diffuse arguments almost instantaneously. This is available pretty much any major bookseller -- Amazon, Barnes & Noble. We'll have a link to it in the show notes, of course.

You can also find out a lot more about Nancy and the book at [NancyDreyfus.com](http://NancyDreyfus.com). We'll have a link to that in the show notes as well.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. We would love to hear your questions and comments about this or any other episode, so please call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083 or e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

I'm Ned Daze. Until next time, stay happily married.

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