

Announcer: This is Episode number 154 of Stay Happily Married, "The Suspicion Is Killing Me."

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Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you ever find yourself going through your spouse's cell phone or email account searching for something, anything that will confirm your suspicions of flirting, cheating, or foul play? Have your searches always left you empty-handed and wondering, "Where else should I look?"

Perhaps the question you should be asking yourself is: Why are you so suspicious of your spouse to begin with? Is your past coming back to ruin your current relationship?

Wow. Today I'm here with Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio. Nicole is no stranger to the show, and she's with us today to talk about where this suspicion comes from, and to rid the relationship of its harmful effects.

Nicole practices in Durham, North Carolina with Lepage Associates. She helps couples repair marriages damaged by trust issues on a daily basis. She has her Doctorate in Clinical Psychology with a focus in interpersonal dynamics. She counsels individuals, groups, couples, families. Nicole, I am glad to have you back today. Welcome back to the show.

Nicole: Thanks so much.

Lee: Boy, suspicion. You know, I think all of us at one time or another wonder a little bit. I mean, isn't that normal?

Nicole: Oh, absolutely. I actually think that everyone should have a little bit of suspicion. It keeps us alert and on the lookout for any danger.

Lee: Good, good. Then I guess, I mean, I don't have a lot, just a . . . and I don't know how to check my wife's cell phone. But if I did, I'd be checking. I'll tell you who I'm suspicious of is my 17-year-old. Well, all kidding aside, he clears the memory from his cell phone after every call.

Nicole: Oh, yeah.

Lee: And I don't actually check his phone, but I see him do that after every call, which him I need to wonder about. Let me ask you, though, how often is trust and

suspicion a major issue with the couples that you're helping? Does it come up a lot or is it just once in a while?

Nicole: No, it comes up a lot. I would say damaged trust is a factor for the couples that I work with about 75% of the time. The thing about trust is there are so many ways to break trust, and that we're all only human and bound to make mistakes at some point in our relationship. Once trust is broken, spouses often find themselves on guard, kind of looking for the next incident of disappointment.

Lee: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I mean, once it's happened, boy, you'd really have a legitimate reason for worrying, I guess.

Nicole: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: You'd stop talking yourself out of it. So from an insider's perspective, what are people doing? You're hearing all the stories. What are the most common ways that spouses are snooping on one another?

Nicole: I think the most common way is checking email. So if the spouse leaves their email up or somehow they figure out their password, so there's a lot of email checking going on. There's a lot of, like you mentioned, in the cell phones, looking at text logs or call logs. You may find information there. Now we have Facebook, so people are using Facebook sometimes to snoop on their spouses. Every now and then there's the occasional private detective that's hired and all of those things happen. But usually what happens more often is that the suspicious partner is just really asking a lot of questions, making a lot of accusations or trying to really control their partner.

Lee: Right, right. Yeah, I hear that all the time. Are the suspicions that you're seeing with your folks, are they usually supported by some sort of evidence or is it just kind of a feeling that's causing people to be suspicious?

Nicole: Yes, most people report that they started snooping just because they had that kind of gut feeling that something was off. Our subconscious picks up on lots of little cues our partner is giving us without us really even knowing it, and that often results in that kind of gut feeling without having easily identifiable reasons. But then, some people's suspicion or "trust detector" – and I use air quotes for that – is set to very sensitive. Something like the car alarms where you just walk by them and it goes off. So sometimes when people have that kind of really sensitive trust detector, "evidence" – again, using air quotes – looks different from other people's evidence who may have a less sensitive trust detector.

Lee: Right.

Nicole: Yeah. For example, one person may assume that their partner is up to no good if they didn't text when they said they were going to, while someone else might just figure that, oh, they forgot, without assigning any wrong-doing.

Lee: A minute ago, we were talking about different ways that people are snooping, and as you were answering this last question, it popped into my head where I remembered – this'll probably freak some people out for me to tell you this – but we've had on more than a few occasions people bring in their spouse's underwear in a Ziploc bag.

Nicole: Oh, my gosh.

Lee: Wanting us to have it tested, and that has gone in some very weird directions. Then recently we had a vendor mail us – I think because we do this show – a sample of a semen detection kit that apparently you can buy online or in drugstores. I don't know where you get it, but they were wanting us to promote, to talk about their product, so I guess, sort of, we are now. But yeah, now that we're talking about it, it's like gosh, people really are very suspicious.

Nicole: Yeah, that is taking it to a whole new level.

Lee: Yeah, you haven't had that one walk in the door yet.

Nicole: I haven't.

Lee: Nicole, here's the Ziploc.

Nicole: Like, "I don't know what to do with this."

Lee: Yeah. Let me ask you though, so as we talk about this, what happens to the person that's being suspected? How does that impact the relationship, that they feel like, gosh, somebody is looking at my email all the time and checking my Facebook?

Nicole: Yeah, I think most people, even if they aren't misbehaving, get pretty annoyed by the constant snooping and accusations. It's pretty confusing for a spouse who is behaving to be accused of misbehaving, and most people don't tolerate confusion well in relationships. So if it continues, the targeted spouse usually gets angry, and then the suspicious spouse then interprets that as guilt, which only amps it up and continues the cycle. In addition to confusion, the targeted spouse can also feel really just misunderstood and hurt that their partner doesn't assume the best about them.

Lee: Right, right. Yeah, it's a logical cycle. I can see where it really can spiral out of control. We're talking a lot about how the people are responding to one another and what they're doing and how they're behaving. Digging down here into the causes, what causes this trust issue to really reach this problem level? Is it, in fact,

something that a spouse is doing, or is it something other than just the behavior of the people that are involved?

Nicole: It can be either or both. I've seen couples come in where they didn't actually have any instances in their own life of someone breaking trust, but they watched their parents do something that broke the trust in their marriage. It can go as far back as that, so it can be previous inappropriate behavior with other people, either by their current partner or past partner, even people in completely different relationships. It isn't always sexual behavior that results in these problem-level trust issues. It can be that a partner wasn't there for them during a really hard time in their life or a partner made a major decision without consulting them, like taking a job or moving money. All of those can damage trust.

Lee: Right. Where does the whole suspicion start to show itself? Where do you see it come first? Is it like a communication breakdown or a breakdown in the intimate relations? Or where do you see it acted out?

Nicole: Usually, if the suspicious spouse is sharing their suspicious with their partner in an accusatory way, likely first what's happening is they're having a lot of arguments, which can lead to one or both partners feeling really disconnected or withdrawing from the relationship. What happens often, as well, is the suspicious spouse really attempts to control the targeted spouse, which usually doesn't go well and results in more arguments. So first you see the surge in arguments about this.

Lee: Okay. Yeah, that makes sense that arguing would pick up. Are there habits or behaviors that lead one spouse to really start believing that the other spouse is unfaithful, I guess, even if they're not being unfaithful?

Nicole: Yeah, there are, and I guess I should put a disclaimer out there first for this question, because none of these mean that your spouse is definitely being unfaithful. These are just the things that really kind of perk up people's antennae:

So working late a lot; not coming home when they said they were going to; being really secretive about phone calls, like maybe going into another room and closing the door when normally they would just kind of have a phone call out in front of you; or really making sure that their phone is somewhere where you can't easily get to it. A sudden interest in their own appearance, like either losing a lot of weight or dressing nicer; changes in how they're spending money or how they're spending their time; or kind of just not being as engaged in the relationship as they usually are.

Lee: Right, right. Yeah, those are the things that I hear all the time. It's funny, it's like the classic sitcom. Many of those things could be, like, we're planning a surprise birthday party for you.

Nicole: Right, yeah.

Lee: Or it could be that I'm sleeping with my boss. But, okay, is it usually the husbands or the wives who are more likely to get suspicious of what their spouse is up to and start searching for these clues?

Nicole: There's actually been research on this, and the research suggests that it's women who are more likely to look for clues in email and cell phones when they're feeling suspicious.

Lee: And they would be right. I mean, is there data that tells us who commits more adultery? It's men more than women, isn't it? I mean, you have to have somebody to . . .

Nicole: It's only slightly higher; like it's not as high as you think. There are a lot more women who are having affairs than you would guess.

Lee: They're sneakier.

Nicole: Yeah.

Lee: Their husbands aren't as suspicious, that's what it is. The husbands need to get a clue and start going through the cell phone. Right. Okay.

Now what about, if one spouse does figure out, okay look, something has gone on here. Here's where I'm going with this. There is snooping going on. There may or may not be any basis for the snooping, but you have confirmed, "My email is being watched now. There's something happening here that is not legit and it's my spouse doing it."

Nicole: Right.

Lee Rosen: How does that affect the relationship? Let's say there's no adultery or misbehavior going on, but you find out your spouse is keeping tabs on you? What does that do to your marriage?

Nicole: Well, it all depends on how the spouse who is now being watched is going to interpret being watched. So if they take a second to pause in that confusion of why would my partner be spying on me, then they can really try to get into their shoes to understand why their partner's so suspicious in the first place.

In talking with them about, okay, is this a past hurt, or is this something that I've been doing that you've been misinterpreting? In that way, it's going to threaten the relationship a lot less. If they are instantly offended by not being trusted, then it's going to create a downward spiral, right, and no one's going to feel safe.

Lee: Right, okay. Yeah, that absolutely makes sense to me. What if this is all coming from prior stuff that's happened in your spouse's life? There's lack of trust because of issues that they've had to deal with. How do you work on that? How do you overcome that so that you can have a marriage that will work?

Nicole: Yeah. First it's really important that the person who's having the suspicions really acknowledges what effects the past hurts from their life are having on them currently. You do that by basically looking at when are you feeling the most suspicious of your current partner, and looking back to see if there are any similarities to what happened in that previous relationship. So, for example, if you found out that your partner at the time in the past was really seeing another woman when he told you that he was out with the guys, do you now tend to freak out a little bit when your partner now has guys' night?

So if you start to see some patterns, it's really possible that your past relationship is interfering with your current one. So if you're seeing those kinds of similarities of, like, you're freaking out now about something that was really similar that happened in the past, then that's your biggest clue. At that point, you have to call it for what it is. So I call them artifacts. You call it an artifact from my past, and recognize it's a self-protection method that you're just over-applying to the current relationship. Then you look at your current relationship to see if you have any evidence to really be suspicious of your partner, and sort out the suspicion that's justified and what's not.

Lee: Okay. Well, that applies to folks that have a history that causes them to be more suspicious, because of things that have happened. What if you've just been watching too much "CSI" or whatever . . . well, I mean, seriously because the world does make you kind of not trust people, between the news and the TV shows.

Nicole: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: What if your suspicions, you know, there's no history. You've become this kind of suspicious person. What do you do in a case like that, where there is no basis for it, but you find out your spouse is sneaking around watching you, and there is no history? How do you deal with that?

Nicole: Well, whether or not past history is involved, it's really helpful to communicate to your partner that you're having some thoughts of suspicion, and then brainstorm together, what would help you feel safer.

So kind of take a look at, are there things that your partner is doing maybe that's leading you to feel more suspicious, and then making requests for changes that seem reasonable for both of you. So kind of just calling it for what it is. It's like, "Hey, look, so I've been watching a lot of "CSI" lately. I'm feeling a little

suspicious. Is there something that we can do to help me feel a little safer for the time being, until this passes?"

Lee: Right.

Nicole: And then just kind of brainstorming about it and figuring out what would be reasonable changes to help you feel a little bit safer until the suspicion kind of goes away.

Lee: The chastity belt is coming back, right? It's a modern innovation, the chastity belt. Yeah, I mean it is very interesting. So you're seeing all these folks, and you have ideas how to deal with suspicion where it's unwarranted. What I want to know is, is it usually unwarranted, or when somebody comes in and this becomes a topic, is it usually justified suspicion?

Nicole: I would say it's actually about half and half. So, I definitely have a lot of couples coming in my office that there's been an affair at some point in their relationship, and that maybe there's not an affair now, but they just haven't built up their trust yet from that previous affair. I would say it's about half current relationship problems and half they had past relationships where this happened, or they watched their parents go through an affair.

Lee: Right, right. Are the odds any better for helping suspicious people in relationships that are kind of being impacted by that, are the odds better if it's based on prior history rather than it just being based on having sort of a suspicious personality?

Nicole: I think that usually the couples who have this suspicious personality, I think they typically do a little bit better, because I think it's a little bit easier to recognize, okay, this is just kind of my brain going into overdrive and this really isn't supported by anything. I think those couples tend to do a little bit better, whereas the couples where there actually has been something in their past, they have to do a little more work to get through that.

Lee: That's almost the opposite of what I would have guessed. I would have guessed the ones that have that suspicious personality or, I don't know, you probably didn't study this term in your Ph.D. school, the wackier people that would be harder to fix. But who knows.

Anyway, we've covered a lot of ground here with suspicion and who's up to what and checking your cell phone and everything, underwear, we won't even go there. But are there things that we've missed or points that we need to make to help people get through this?

Nicole: Yeah. I just want to say again that if you have a suspicious partner, that reacting with anger is generally not going to make it better. It's really important to understand that this is something that may have nothing to do with you, but that

you can still help your partner through, and that you can be understanding and really kind of brainstorm with them about what's going to help them feel safer.

Then the other thing is that I would say don't do anything you wouldn't want your partner to know about. Life is just so much easier that way.

Lee: That's a good point. That's right. That's the best advice all along. Yeah, if you'll just not do that, no one will wonder, hopefully no one will wonder, except for your C.S.I. spouse, yeah. That is excellent advice.

Nicole, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you giving us this advice.

Nicole: Thank you.

Lee: If you want to learn more about Nicole and her practice, visit the website at Lepage Associates. It's LepageAssociates.com. And if you're suspicious of your spouse or your spouse is suspicious of you, you can reach Nicole at 919-572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you will join us again next week. We love hearing from you. In the meantime, please keep your comments and feedback coming. You can reach our comment line at 919-256-3083. You can email us at comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

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

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