

Lee: This is Episode number 157 of Stay Happily Married: Learning to Trust Again.

Announcer: 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: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Trust. Gosh, it is the linchpin of the relationship, and today you're going to learn a system that will help you trust again. Relationships are filled with lots of moving pieces. You've got patience, you've got compromise but probably the most important element of any relationship is trust.

Without trust, a relationship can become stunted. It doesn't really grow. When trust is taken away from a relationship, it can crumble, it just falls apart. We all know there are lots of ways for trust to start to disintegrate. Trust is one of the hardest pieces of a relationship to build, and it's even more difficult to earn it back once you've lost it.

I'm really excited today to have an expert on trust. It's Dr. Abigail Hirsch. She's with us from Denver, Colorado. Now, this is someone that boy, she is accomplished. She went to undergraduate school at Harvard, which I'm always impressed by. She did her Masters at the University of Colorado. Then most significantly, she got her PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Massachusetts.

She's a therapist, and she is the Chief Executive Office of Power of Two. That's a marriage counseling program; we're going to talk about it today. She was able to obtain a \$2.5 million federal grant to develop the resources that they use in the program, Power of Two.

On top of all that, and I'm really pleased that we have people with a marriage track record because it's one thing to talk about it, it's another thing to do it. She's been married for 12 years. She's got three children. I'm excited to have her with us. Dr. Abigail Hirsch, welcome to the program.

Abigail: Thank you, Lee. It's nice to be here.

Lee: You know, you're dealing with folks in your practice and through Power of Two you're dealing with trust issues day in and day out. What sort of issues are you seeing and dealing with?

Abigail: There's a wide range of kinds of trust issues, varying from somebody that's done something that's really egregious, and sometimes concerns about trust come up

from somebody's bad experiences. Whether it was past relationships or in the family they grew up in.

Lee: Right, right. What is it, what's the most common scenario where you're seeing a breach of trust? What is it that's damaging trust in the relationships you're working with?

Abigail: I think the two biggies are either some kind of an affair or an infidelity, and then the second one is some kind of a financial breach of confidence.

Lee: Gotcha. Is one more common than the other, or are they both pretty equally?

Abigail: I think they're both pretty common. And honestly, they're both far too common just in general.

Lee: Right. Now the affairs, we all know what that's about. What about the financial thing? What sort of things are you seeing there that are really causing damage to the trust?

Abigail: The root of it, almost always, on both affairs and financial has to do with the couple not having the skills to talk through difficult situations or things that they're not pleased with in the relationship. Then one person starts to go at it the solo route, and that's almost always the start of this breakdown in trust.

On the financial ones, either it's I'm going to make some investments that I'm not sure that my wife would be supportive about, but I think they're the right thing to do, so I'm just going to do them quietly on the side. Then honestly, whether they go well or they go sour, they can lead to feelings of lack of trust. Or likewise, my husband would never let me buy that, so I'm just going to do it anyway.

Lee: It would be one thing if you just did it, but it's another thing if you already know that your spouse would not approve of that decision and then you go out and do it anyway. So that's, I guess, where you're really getting into the damage to the relationship.

Abigail: I think the biggest place the damage is done is actually two steps back. It's when you have that little feeling in you of, I think this would be uncomfortable to talk about, and then don't have the skills to talk about that uncomfortable thing. Or to listen when your spouse raises something that's a little bit uncomfortable.

Lee: Right. Yes, I can see somebody accidentally getting into a breach of trust with the financial thing. I don't know accidentally, but it's a slippery slope. But boy, the affair thing is pretty black and white. You're either doing it or you're not, I suppose.

Abigail: Interestingly, that also is very much a slippery slope. A huge, huge percentage of affairs are what we like to call 'accidental starts.'

The people don't go out seeking the affairs, but they're a little bit unhappy at home, and then there's someone at work of the opposite sex who they're working very closely with on a project, or they get Facebook friended by somebody that used to be a past boyfriend from high school.

It's not any intentional going out to seek this affair. It's that slowly that other person starts to creep in and fill places that should be saved for your spouse. Again, that nobody listens to the little voices, and nobody has the skills to talk about those little voices without it causing an argument.

Lee: Right, yes, I see the similarities. It makes a lot of sense. What is the tipping point for couples lacking trust? At what point does the lack of trust really become a critical issue in marriages?

Abigail: Well, I would say that it's really the right point to say is the tripping point is as soon as you're having any of those little voices. That's concern, or of mistrust, or if something just doesn't right to me, that it's very easy to say, "h, I'll just ignore that." But to see those little voices is a big, huge screaming red flag.

Almost always, those little voices go with some other signs that wait, something is not right here and that needs addressing. If you can address it then, it'll be nothing and you'll move on happily with more and more trust. Whereas when one doesn't listen to them, then one starts being tempted to hide and thus the slope starts to take over.

Lee: I'm curious, while we're talking about trust, obviously sometimes there are folks that one spouse has done something wrong, and they shouldn't have done it. But other times I think there may be a lack of trust when there really hasn't been a mistake.

Do you ever see trust damaged where it's just because of the way somebody behaves that the trust starts to go away? Even though nobody's really had an affair or run off with the money?

Abigail: Yes. I think that's exactly right. And I do think, like we were saying, depending on what people are bringing into a marriage they certainly have different sensitivities to an ease with which they're able to feel. It's like instead of that sense of trust, or with which they need a little more openness and communication from their spouse to hear that.

Lee: Do you see any sort of patterns in your practice? And in Power of Two, you're dealing with lots of folks. Are there relationships that are almost doomed to have

trust issues? Are there stereotypes, I guess, we could apply to relationships that would say hey, this is a situation that's headed for some trouble on the trust front?

Abigail: Good, that's a really good question. First of all, lack of trust happens to newlyweds, it happens to people who've been married for 50 years. It definitely is a problem that can happen to anyone in any marriage, as opposed to being oh, this kind of marriage.

But the two signals I would really say, really are signals that this couple might have problems. The first is, again, tends to be the problems in the marriage happen before the problems with trust. So there's a breakdown in open ability to go back and forth about things.

Then the second thing that's often, often true in couples that have problems with trust is that they have very poor examples of healthy marriages, either from their past, or in their present world. Perhaps somebody's working in a corporate culture where everybody goes out to the bar every night and affairs are rampant.

Lee: Right, yes. As you're talking, I'm sitting here thinking, you're a therapist. You have a PhD in clinical psychology. You're an expert on these topics. I almost think it's ridiculous to ask you this question, but I'm going to ask: do you recommend therapy as a solution for working on these trust issues? And if you do, does it work?

Abigail: I like getting asked that question, but I happen to have a surprising answer. On the one hand, I definitely recommend, yes. There are many, many things that a good marriage counselor and one who's a good fit for a couple can be incredibly helpful with.

At the same time, part of the reason we developed Power of Two is for most things, therapy - and by therapy in this context I'm meaning what most therapies do, which is a lot of insight work - are not going to be enough to do the whole picture. The couples also need the skills so they know how to talk and to listen and to make joint decisions together, so that that trust can be rebuilt.

Lee: Well, I'm glad you mentioned Power of Two. I promised folks we would talk to them about this system. What in the world is Power of Two?

Abigail: Power of Two originally was a workshop and a book and a workbook. Then when we got this federal funding, we said look, in this day and age, where do people turn for help? Things like this podcast. They look on the Internet. We need a way to deliver high quality, first rate marriage education over the Internet. That's the Power of Two Online, is it's a program that's Internet based marriage and relationship skills education.

What we learned as we built it is that people needed a little bit more help than just hey, here's the information, do it yourself. So it also has an e-coaching component. All our members get an actual, real person who's their coach, and who's there to help them through the program and answer questions and think through specific pieces that are of importance to them. Like trust, for example.

Lee: If you're wanting to look at the website, it's poweroftwomarriage.com, right? With the word 'two' spelled out, is that right?

Abigail: Yes, that's it.

Lee: I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes so people can check it out, but tell us about it. You go to this website. You know, you're having trouble in your marriage. Trust has fallen apart. What the heck is going to happen when you get there?

Abigail: When you come into the website, you set up a membership. Then there's a few introductory activities to help you figure out what are you wanting to get out of this, and what pieces of those programs do you want to start with?

That's actually to help both you and to help your coach get to know who you are. Then, the core of the program is skill units and you'll get, based on what you do in your initial pieces, you'll pick an area to work on and you'll get a set of units. Which is, depending on who you are, two to four hours of work, but it's all broken down into about 10 or 15 minute activities.

At the same time, you'll also meet - that's digitally meet, it's all done over a chat interface - your coach. Your coach will also have some questions for you, and be there to answer questions for you.

Then, the basic idea is that this is something you do. You can do it as little as five minutes a month, or you can do it as much as an hour a night. Whatever for you, for your schedule, for your life is the right pace to be moving at. You start to build up both a repertoire of skills and how to really apply them in your life, for changing your marriage.

Lee: So is this something that I'm doing by myself, or am I doing it jointly with my spouse?

Abigail: That is one of the things that's really been amazing about this program. It's worked just as well if you do it alone, or if you do it together. That's, on the therapy front, one of the things that's very hard for couples often is one spouse will say, "I want to go to couple's counseling." The other one says, "No way, I'm not ready."

This is a way if you're the spouse that's ready, that you can jump in and you can start learning the skills and applying them. It will start to change your marriage. Your spouse may, down the road, say, "Wow, I like this new you. What's happening?" Then you can share with them and maybe they'll join. Or your spouse may never join and it's still going to help your marriage.

Lee: Now you're talking a lot about skills. Most of us are assuming, when we talk to a mental health professional, that we're going to end up with our head on the pillow on the couch talking about things our mother said to us. What is the deal with skills? Help me understand that.

Abigail: The best way I like to think about it, it's like a score grid. Say you want to become a better basketball player. You could watch replays of old games from now until forever. You would learn a lot about basketball, but it wouldn't do much for helping you become a better basketball player.

The way you become a better player is you get out there, you take a lesson and you learn a little bit, or get some coaching, learn a little bit about how to dribble or how to shoot, or whatever the skill piece is that you want to learn. Then you practice it a whole bunch in drills, and then you start to use it in your games.

Marriage really works the same way, that the more that you know the fundamental skills, and there really are skills, I think that's surprising for a lot of people. Marriage is like almost everything else in this world, that there are skills about how to do it more successfully and less successfully, and they're learnable.

Back to the therapy question, that's a piece that I think you're very right is missing from many therapists' approach to couples work.

Lee: I'm just intrigued by the whole model, and I love that you can do it without your spouse because I'm so frequently hearing of spouses that will not go. They're just not interested. How does Power of Two connect the dots for me between Power of Two and the loss of trust.

Abigail: This is the piece, loss of trust starts originally at its little voice core, with little pieces the couple's not able to talk about together. Where a couple can't understand each other, where one of them's unhappy with a decision that feels like, oh, I can't make that decision if my spouse will never make one that I like.

Without the skills pieces to talk openly, to listen openly, to make decisions you both like, that's what sets people down that slippery slope. By contrast, when you get those skill pieces, both of you can rewind your way back up the slippery slope, or you can prevent the marriage from ever getting there in the first place.

Lee: Right. Now, you said that you know that Power of Two works whether both spouses are doing it or just one. How do you know that it works?

Abigail: With one really nice random research trial that's been submitted for publication, but that basically is showing that Power of Two online seems to be as potent as any other marriage education program out there. Including the bulk of programs which you go to an eight to a 16 hour workshop; that's how most programs work. Even if you're just doing a few minutes a day or a few minutes a week, even, the skills are very potent. So picking them up and thinking about them makes a huge difference for both.

Lee: I assume that Power of Two is not free. You're talking to a coach and all that. What does this thing cost?

Abigail: Well, it is relative the therapy, pretty close to free. Right now it's \$18 a month per membership, so it's like having a Netflix account or a few cups of coffee, to get all the help you need to really change your marriage.

Lee: Wow. It sounds like a no brainer; I think I'm going to go sign up as soon as we get off. And it just sounds so easy, you don't have to go negotiate this with your spouse. You're going to learn some skills. They're going to help you to stay happily married. Where's the downside of \$18 a month? That is just an amazing thing to me. How long has it been around now?

Abigail: Let's see, so we've been working on this project, we've just been endorsed this year. I have to say, part of the reason it works so well is we had this wonderful funding from the Department of Human Services that let us very slowly figure out: wait, what are all of the key components to making online marriage education work?

The first is, it has to be fun. So it is fun, there's lots of humor and lightweight activities and modern technology leveraging, kind of game-y stuff. Then the second is, we learned very quickly like you said, it needed to be something that fit with people's lives. So it's something you can do without getting a babysitter, or late at night when you have a few minutes. Or during your lunch break at work for 10 minutes.

Lee: Right. Well, I'm glad you got the money to do it, because I doubt that'll be happening down the road, the way things are changing with budgets and all that. What else do we need to know about Power of Two before we let you go? I'm anxious to get off the line and go sign up.

Abigail: I'm glad. We'll get you set up. I think, actually, the more important thing to know is not about Power of Two but is about marriage, both relating to trust and to marriage in general.

I just always like to tell people that the biggest mistake you see is people not having high enough expectations for their marriage, and thinking that a marriage

is well, okay, or well, he occasionally does things that I don't like. Or she occasionally nags me. But none of those are present in a marriage that's really a healthy marriage.

If there's anything that you're not liking, it's way better to go ahead and use the resources like Power of Two online early, than to wait and say oh, well this is just the way marriage is.

Lee: Right. Great advice. Dr. Abigail Hirsch, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

Abigail: You're welcome; it's my pleasure.

Lee: Now, I'm going to go sign up. You ought to do it, too. This just sounds like a resource that's too good to be true, and there's research there that says that it works. So what've you got to lose? Give it a try for a month. See how you feel about it. The site is poweroftwomarriage.com. That's T-W-O, marriage.com. You can also get up with Abigail's office at 877-411-4948.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will come back next week. In the meantime, if you have comments and feedback, we'd love to hear from you. You can reach us a couple of different ways. One is our comment line at 919-256-3083. The other is to email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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