

Ned: This is Episode number 162 for Stay Happily Married: Mastering Our Master Conflicts.

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Ned: I'm Ned Daze, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. A lot of people say that opposites attract, and some people say that birds of a feather flock together. Our guest today says that these are kind of superficial ways to look at how we end up with our spouse, and that really there's a much deeper aspect that brings us together.

I'm here with relationship therapist, Dr. Stephen Betchen, who's joining us today to discuss how keeping a balance of conflict and not necessarily a lack of conflict is really the key to a happy and healthy relationship.

Stephen is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a certified sex therapist with a private practice in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He's also a Clinical Assistant Professor at Thomas Jefferson University graduate program in couples and family therapy, and a Senior Supervisor and Lecturer in the postgraduate training program for couples and family therapy at the Council for Relationships in Philadelphia.

He contributes regularly to both scholarly journals and popular national magazines. Stephen has just released a book called, "Magnetic Partners: Discover How the Hidden Conflict That Once Attracted You to Each Other is Now Driving You Apart."

Welcome to the show, Stephen, I'm so glad you could join us.

Stephen: Oh, glad that you can have me here, Ned, I appreciate it.

Ned: Yeah. Well, I'm really excited about talking about this because I kind of get the sense it's something we overlook. We're often kind of looking at these superficial things that draw people together, but you're saying there really is a much deeper issue that is a lot stronger than these ideas of either opposites or similarities. And so, I'm kind of wondering what have you found in your practice that is the most common factor that really draws spouses together?

Stephen: Well, usually, Ned, the couples come in presenting the same symptoms, usually around sex, finances; they complain about poor communication, problems with the kids, work and money. And of course, with the economy the way it is, money is even a bigger issue than ever. But these, and I consider these symptoms, are not the underlying cause of their problems.

Yes, as women have become more and more equal to men, we see more and more power and control struggles in relationships, but basically, I see the same problems over and over again. And I see that couples come in and they feel completely overwhelmed, as if they have a million of these problems, and really to me they are a million symptoms.

But they have one underlying problem. They really don't know themselves, and they really don't know their partners. I've found that if they pick right and are truly in love with one another, and that is accepting their partner's self and flaws and all, they can weather many of these symptoms. In fact, many of these symptoms won't nearly seem as big a problem as the couples perceive them to be.

But you know, this underlying conflict that I've found - and I call it a master conflict - I find it's really responsible for almost all of these symptoms. And each couple has their own master conflict. They have the same fights over and over again about the different symptoms, but it's always that one underlying master conflict that is really calling the shots.

Now we all have a lot of conflicts inside of us, but we usually have one big one, and that's what I've found in working with couples for over 30 years, and it follows us everywhere.

There's a great joke by the comedian - I don't know if you remember him, his name is David Brenner but he's from South Philadelphia. And everybody from Philadelphia criticizes all of us in New Jersey. But the Philadelphians feel that they get lost in New Jersey; the driving here is crazy. We have ramps and circles and these things they're not used to. And Brenner from Philadelphia said, "I've mastered New Jersey. You just have to realize it has one tree and it follows you everywhere you go."

Well, I say we have one master conflict and it follows us everywhere we go, and we just have to figure out what that master conflict is to control our symptoms.

Ned: Well, yeah, I was kind of wondering, when you see couples with all these problems - they're arguing about the kids, money and sex. It's really not about those issues per se; it's kind of this underlying problem. And so is this really an inner struggle in each spouse, or is this kind of a conflict between the two?

Stephen: It's an inner struggle in each spouse. That's what the master conflict is. It's an unconscious struggle within ourselves, and we tend to choose someone with the same inner conflict. For example, I call it a duality. Like, what is a master conflict?

Well, it's a duality. It's not like having an angel and devil inside of us. I'd liken it to having two politicians inside of us, and they're arguing a point. And they're so

good at it we just can't decide which side to choose, so we try to balance our lives by going back and forth because we really want it all. We don't want to give up something to get something. I think that we have a really hard time doing that.

People will come into my office and they will just stay for the longest time, because they just refuse to give up something to get something. So for example, if you want power in your relationship, you could take power in your relationship, but you might also then end up feeling burdened or overwhelmed.

So when I ask a person well, "Then why don't you kind of cut back? Why don't you balance out your power?" They don't want to give that up! They want the power and they don't want to feel burdened at the same time.

So then they're naturally attracted to somebody who has the same conflict. So that person might come into the relationship and they might want respect, for example. But they might not do the things that they need to do to get respect from their partner. So they say, "Well, I want more control. I don't want to be talked to the way I'm talked to; I don't want to be treated the way I'm treated."

And I'll say, "Then why don't you act differently and maybe you won't be treated that way?" But you see, they also are in conflict, so we have two people with the exact same conflict. And the reason that we pick somebody with the exact same conflict - and this is all done unconsciously - and I liken it to, remember when Count Dracula would kind of, in the movies he's portrayed as being able to stare into a person's eyes and then lure them away to his lair?

Ned: Right.

Stephen: Well, I liken it to having two Count Dracula's staring into one another's eyes and just saying, "You've got the same conflict I do, I know it - I'm in love. I think I'm in love!" And then they go off together.

If I put you in a room with 100 people, you would come out with the person with the same master conflict. Why? Because that person then will help you not be able to change, because we don't like change. Change is anxiety-provoking, it's depressing, we suffer loss when we change. When we give up something, we suffer loss. We don't know what the future is going to bring.

I've had many clients over the years say, "I'd rather deal with the devil I know than the devil I don't know." And see, we unconsciously are attracted to somebody with the same conflict so that we don't really have to change, and that's okay because that's going to happen naturally. There's nothing inherently wrong about master conflicts, we all have them. The problem is they can get unruly, especially if we don't know we've got them and we don't know what they are, and so they get out of control and that causes our symptoms.

Ned: All right. And so I'm wondering, you talk about these in the book, how many? Have you identified kind of a certain number of these really big master conflict issues that a lot of couples are dealing with?

Stephen: Yeah, I've identified 19 master conflicts, seven of them are a little bit more prominent than the others, but basically it depends on the couple. Power versus passivity, which I just gave an example of, is one of the common ones. Closeness versus distance, where in each partner there's a part of them that wants to get close, and then the part of them that wants to remain a little more independent, a little more distant.

There's adequacy versus inadequacy, where part of you feels that you're pretty adequate and you get things done and you're competent, and the other side of you believes you're not. Conformity versus rebellion is a popular one, where part of you wants to conform and do all of the things that you were raised to do, and another part of you wants to kind of raise a little hell.

Caretaking - this is a common one in addictive couples - care-taking versus getting your needs met, where part of you wants to take care of somebody, and the other part of you wants to get your own needs met. So I've identified several of them, and I say in the book that I haven't identified all of them because I haven't seen every couple on the planet.

Ned: Right.

Stephen: So I know there are many more out there that I haven't even thought of.

Ned: I'm wondering, is there - well, you know, people are clearly attracted to each other based on this master conflict in the beginning. When things start to break down, do you notice this happening at a particular time? Is there kind of a time frame or an era in the marriage where this really starts to come to a head and starts to cause these problems that are really more symptoms?

Stephen: Well, it's fascinating when a couple come in, I always do an evaluation and I ask about their relationships, and one thing that kind of freaks them out is I'll ask about their high school relationships. And they think well, what does that matter? That was so long ago. What does that have to do with my marriage?

Well, I think that these problems were always there. There are always signs and symptoms of the master conflict. There are always cues and clues, but our defenses block us from seeing them so that we will be attracted to somebody with the same master conflict.

Does it take some time to develop? Yeah, it does, but for example if a woman comes in and says - which I've had this experience before - "I can't believe it, my husband's an alcoholic, and I grew up with alcoholic parents and my last husband

was an alcoholic. And I don't know how I did this this time!" And I'll say, "Well, it looks like there's a pattern." And the person will say, "But he didn't drink for the first six months of our relationship, so how was I supposed to see that?"

Well, the drinking isn't the only kind of symptom of alcoholism; there are general other addictive behaviors that the person kind of ignores. So the signs and clues were always there. I do think it takes a little time for them to become exacerbated during a relationship. Sometimes during times of stress, for example, you might see more of it. And for example, if you have a master conflict around success, and then you end up getting married, you buy a house and you have children you, need to get a really good job. The conflict might show itself even more in that particular area, but it was always probably there.

Ned: Well, I'm wondering, you're talking about these early relationships and going back and looking at those. I'm wondering - the master conflict itself - is this something that starts really young, are we born with a master conflict? Do we develop a particular one at an early age? Where does that start?

Stephen: Yeah. Well, I'm not a geneticist but I do believe in nature. But what I've found is that I'll stick to what I know and what I've found is that they develop early-on in what I call our families of origin. Oftentimes, our parents have had the same master conflicts we do, or something very similar. And so we interact with them, we watch them, we have our own personal relationships with each one of them, and this helps to determine what type of master conflict.

For example, if you have a success versus sabotage master conflict or what I call a big versus small master conflict, you may have found that your father might've gotten depressed at a young age and just completely given up and stopped working. Or you might have had a parent that was just over the top as an over-achiever, and maybe the other partner tried to stop that person. Or maybe you have a parent who was successful and then lost everything. So the conflict comes from growing up in your family of origin, and then you exacerbate it with life experiences and then your relationships, and then it becomes pretty much your own baby.

Ned: All right. I'm wondering, do you ever find couples who somehow have gotten together and who don't share the same master conflict? And if they do, if that actually happens, do they have more problems or fewer problems than couples who are dealing with the same master conflict?

Stephen: Yeah, I haven't found that. And I've been trying to disprove this theory for several years. When I first started to really look at it more seriously, I began to say to myself, well, this can't be something original or something new. I mean, I've got to be able to disprove it, and I haven't been able to. I really find that we choose people with the same conflict.

I think that we can have flings or very short-lived experiences with people with different master conflicts. You can go to a bar, for example, and meet somebody and have a fling with them, and they might have a different master conflict. But the person that you're going to be really hooked on and attracted to pretty much has the same conflict, and for the most part, that's the person you're going to end up marrying.

Ned: All right. Well I'm wondering - so you know, we've got these issues coming up. When are people coming into your office? Is there kind of a particular thing that causes people to break down and say, "All right, we've got to go to counseling - we've got to fix this?" At what stage in the process are people deciding they need to come see you?

Stephen: Well, unfortunately, and I think this is one of the problems with outcome research with couples therapy, the outcome research is not that optimistic. But that's because many couples come in when they're in crisis. Usually, something big has to happen, whether one of them refuses to have children or they just have a fight about where to live, or somebody does something to a child that the other person doesn't like, or they find out that they're on the verge of bankruptcy or on the verge of divorce or there's an affair.

I mean, these are the things that kind of bring couples in. There really isn't a big market for premarital couples therapy and I wish there was. I think the Catholic Church has done some and made some real headway in that area. But most people want to do what they want to do. They pick who they want to pick; they want the freedom to marry that person, and if you catch them at the beginning of their relationship, most of the time they don't listen. They're ready to just take off and do it, and then they find out later that they've replicated some prior problem.

Ned: So a couple comes to you, they're in crisis. What are the steps that you go through with them to basically figure out this master conflict and address these issues?

Stephen: The first thing I do is an evaluation, and I get a complete history of each partner. A lot of couples' therapists feel that that's unbalancing the relationship, but I will sit there and I will ask one partner at a time several questions. And I expect the other partner to just sit and listen because I think it's very important that they also know who they've really married, because I find that people just - not only do they not know themselves, they don't know their partners either on a deeper level.

So I ask about - of course I ask about current situations - their sex lives, how they're doing financially, any kind of concrete stressors in their lives, how they're doing with the children, how their children are faring. But I want to know about their past relationships, again, going back to high school and college, if they go to college. I want to know about the previous engagements, the previous marriages. I'm looking for patterns of behavior; I'm looking for contradictions that would

reflect an internal conflict. These are the things that I'm really looking for. I'm looking for mixed feelings.

Some people come in and they have one foot out the door, and they haven't even really worked on their relationship. I'm looking for that kind of person because that person may have a history of running from relationships that will just follow them. And I'll tell these couples. I'll say, "Listen, the master conflict follows you everywhere. It doesn't need a visa, it doesn't need a passport. So you can get out of this relationship, but if you don't really understand what happened to this relationship on the deeper level, you're destined to replicate the problem." And as you know, Ned, the divorce rate for second marriages is 67%, I believe.

Ned: Right.

Stephen: That's quite a bit higher than firsts. And that doesn't take into account people who are living together and unhappy. So why is that? Well, people keep marrying the same people over and over again.

Ned: Right. They just kind of go toward the same problems, and they haven't really resolved the over-arching issue that's destroying their relationships. So we're kind of identifying the conflict by looking at the previous relationship, seeing the patterns. Do you do anything to determine where it came from? Is that part of the process as well?

Stephen: Sure. That's where I examine the family, each partner's family of origin. I ask about the parents, I ask about the siblings. I ask about the siblings' relationships, their marriages. I ask about how they felt about their parents' marriage. If their parents were divorced, I ask what was their perception of the divorce. I try to determine if they lean to one parent or if they favor one parent over the other. I ask them about any kind of conflicts that they might have picked up in the family of origin.

But I don't really - I say, kind of, double messages. "Do you feel you ever got any double messages, or your parents acted one way and said something else? Or said something and acted a different way?"

I'm always looking for contradictions, mixed feelings, ambivalence. These are the things that are signs of an unruly master conflict. And then I try to find out to the extent that each spouse was involved in their family of origin. For example, in some families of origin, we've got what we call players and witnesses. That's what I call them anyway.

A player is somebody who is actively involved in the family of origin dynamic. One partner might have enlisted the spouse to be a mediator between his or her parents. That's more of a player, somebody who's more directly involved. Other kids were able to hide from the problems in the family of origin, but they watched

and they felt the feelings associated with the problems going on there - they're witnesses.

The extent to which your parents were in conflict, their conflict was out of hand and that you were involved will determine the intensity and tenacity of your own master conflict as an adult. And then, you will go out and find somebody with basically the same master conflict with the same level of intensity.

Ned: So what's the first step in getting the couple back on track? I know you've kind of talked about the duality of the master conflict. Do you basically sit down and say, okay, you're going to play Role A, you're going to play Role B. How does that work?

Stephen: No. A lot of my therapy is what we call more psycho-dynamic. A lot of it is insight-oriented. I basically want them to get to know themselves. I want each partner to know themselves, because when couples come in they're usually blaming one another. He did this; she did that. She's like this; he's like that."

And I want each partner to focus on themselves, so that the very first thing I do is I let them know by taking this extensive history that hey, we're going to look at you and your whole history. And also, we're going to look at your spouse, and his or her whole history.

And as they get to kind of know themselves and understand this conflict and where it came from, then something really fascinating happens. When they start to realize, especially when they start to realize that, "Gee, I have the same master conflict as my spouse!" So then you start to see less blame going around the room. Because then they're able to say, "Gee, we both have this problem; we both have this same problem! So why are we blaming one another?"

And then they start to work together on getting the master conflict under control.

Ned: All right, terrific. Was there anything else we need to know? Anything that we haven't touched on that you talk about in the book?

Stephen: Well, yeah. I wanted to say that master conflicts, they really can't be cured. I'm not a big salesman of therapy; I'm very realistic. And I think that these things are so deeply engrained - and anybody who's really done this kind of work and tried to completely eradicate them finds out how difficult they can be. And I say that in the book, they play hardball with you. But I do believe they can be managed and controlled. And if we figure out what they are and we figure out where they came from, that's three-quarters of the battle right there.

And then from that point we have to work to keep them under control for the rest of our lives. I kind of liken it a little bit to diabetes. You've got it, it's there and



you've got to control it. But if you can, you can have a great life. And when a master conflict is under control, most of your symptoms are under control.

Ned: Right. Terrific. Well Stephen, thanks so much for being on the show today and talking with us. I really appreciate it.

Stephen: Thank you, Ned.

Ned: And you can, of course, pick up Stephen's book, "Magnetic Partners: Discover How the Hidden Conflict That Once Attracted You to Each Other is Now Driving You Apart" on Amazon.com, and we'll, of course, include a link to that in the show notes. You can also find out more about Stephen and the book by visiting [MagneticPartners.net](http://MagneticPartners.net). We'll have a link to that as well.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love to hear from you. To comment on this or any other episode, 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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