

Lee: This is Episode Number 181 of Stay Happily Married: Make Yourself Heard.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Ever feel like your spouse just isn't listening? Dr. Jessica Barry has the tools you need to get your spouse to finally hear you. The hardest part of a relationship is actually the stage that most largely encapsulates a relationship, the comfortable phase. It's at this point in a relationship that a lot of people tend to tune out the other spouse and begin navigating on autopilot. This lack of effort can lead to feelings of disconnection with your spouse.

Our guest today believes that mindfulness is what can help keep your relationship fresh and help you to feel heard. Dr. Jessica Barry of Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina earned her doctorate in clinical psychology from Argosy University in Washington, D.C. She predominantly works with children, teens, couples and families that have difficulty coping with a wide range of social, emotional and behavioral issues.

When Jessica isn't busy working with couples, she enjoys spending time hiking, drawing, and cooking with her fiancé.

Jessica, welcome to the show. I'm glad you could join us.

Jessica: Thank you very much.

Lee: Mindfulness. I'm excited about this topic. What exactly is mindfulness and why should couples be practicing it?

Jessica: Mindfulness, which is actually based on Eastern philosophies and religion, is the act of paying attention to the present moment. Being mindful in a relationship is the couple's ability to be aware of what their own personal wants, needs and goals are for the relationship and to be able to make conclusions and conscious decisions on how to attain those goals.

Lee: What are you seeing with couples? You're meeting with couples all the time. What issues are you seeing couples dealing with that you think mindfulness might help to address?

Jessica: The short answer is that couples fight. However, the manner in which they navigate the disagreement really affects the stability of the relationship

and how close they feel with each other. What you see is that during an argument, many couples struggle with getting their point across to their partner in a way that's effective both in achieving that understanding and in keeping them moving towards that goal of connectedness.

Lee: What is the fallout of not being mindful? What sorts of things do you see happening in relationships where that's not really a part of how they relate to one another or deal with their own thinking?

Jessica: What I see is that there is that lack of connection. Partners actually end up more wrapped up in their own emotions and their own personal judgments about their partners and themselves that they begin moving away from each other.

During conflicts, they either consciously or unconsciously try to sabotage that ultimate goal, which is connectedness, by reacting to these negative judgments when they become aroused in the situations. As a result, rather than trying to attain closeness with their partner, the person actually retaliates by being critical and judgmental.

Lee: I've never really thought about that being the element that was missing, but it sounds like with a lack of mindfulness you're sort of spiraling in a downward way to a place where your marriage may not survive.

Jessica: A lot of times it does end up in the termination of the relationship. What happens over time is that people become dissatisfied with their relationship and so many opportunities to connect with their partners are left unfilled. Through this frustration and all this conflict, they become conditioned to view their interactions with their partner as something negative, so that frequently they find themselves in more conflict, they move further away from each other, and this creates a lot of distress in the relationship.

Lee: People who are fighting, who are stuck in this situation where there is really no understanding of what is going on from the other side, what are those folks doing? How are they trying to solve this problem before they come in and see you? I'm curious to know what they're doing that isn't working and I'm wondering if there is anything they are doing that is working.

Jessica: Most couples, especially when they've been together for quite some time, you start to know what your own triggers are. You also learn and know what their partner's buttons are. You know exactly which buttons to push. Over time, having these negative experiences with their partners, they actually walk into a conflict with all this history and baggage that they bring into that conversation, into that interaction, and they react upon it.

All those times where they've been hurt and let down, those are the emotions that they're bringing into the current conflict. They're no longer being in the present moment and reacting to the situation at hand. They're responding to everything in the past that's been hurtful to them.

Lee: So they're having a fight and the words that are being said back and forth really have very little to do with anything. The fight is almost in their heads because it's all this history of what has been said and done before.

Jessica: Absolutely. And so many times what they're trying to do is find connection. Let's say your wife planned to have a nice dinner for you and spend time with you when you got home from work, and you let her know that you're going to be home late. Immediately, she becomes upset, she becomes disappointed, and she begins making these negative judgments and statements, such as, "Oh, he's always late. He doesn't want to spend any time with me."

She's making those judgments about both you and then about herself because she's feeling shameful for acting the way she does. By the time you come home, your wife is beyond disappointed. She's furious with you. She may lash out at you and forget what her ultimate goal was, which was actually to spend time with you and connect with you.

At the same time, you may also feel defensive because you want to spend time with her, and yet it's, again, another argument. Emotions flare from both sides, and dinner and time together never actually happen.

Lee: At some point, obviously, folks are realizing, "Hey, this is not working. We're in big trouble," and they come in and see you. I'm curious about what you see them trying to do before they come see you. Are they buying self-help books? What I really want to know is what isn't working out there. As an expert, what do you see that we'd be wasting our time to even try?

Jessica: Couples are trying different things. There are different types of couples and different types of relationships. Some couples can get along pretty well most of the time, but when there's a particular topic that's sensitive to them, the communication breaks down. They're no longer able to be understanding of one another, they can't get their point across effectively, and so they then begin turning away from each other. It's usually those sensitive topics that remain unresolved, whether it's child care or money or not spending that quality time together, that end up building up all this negative emotion.

- Lee: It sort of sounds like once you're stuck in this pattern it's very hard to break out of it without some outside influence.
- Jessica: It is, because what happens is you become on autopilot. You navigate the world based on your assumptions and judgments that you have from prior experiences, and based on that, you're unable to take a more objective and distant view of the situation.
- Lee: When a couple comes in to your office together, what is it that you recommend that they do to go about fixing the situation so that they can get back on track and stay on track?
- Jessica: On the day-to-day level, it's really important to be mindful of your partner and remember why you're together and why you got together in the first place. Remind yourself of what you love about your partner.
- What I tell couples is that it's important when they're together to actually be together, which may mean that you have to put down the TV remote every once in a while and take time to connect. I also tell couples that it's really important to become aware of your own emotional arousals and your partner's arousals during a conflict. As I said, if you've been in the relationship long enough, you've kind of learned what your own triggers are and what your partner's triggers are. Therefore, it's really easy to push those during an argument. You have to remind yourself and ask yourself, "When I engage with my partner, am I getting what I want out of my partner?"
- Lee: It sounds like the whole idea of mindfulness is less about fixing your spouse and more about fixing you, more about your level of awareness of what's going on in your head. Am I on the right track?
- Jessica: Yes, absolutely. It first has to start with the person. If couples can work together in building this mindfulness, it will really create a lot of opportunities to connect with each other, whether it's during a conflict or on a day-to-day basis. It's remembering what brought you together. It's remembering what ideas and interests you've connected on. A lot of work is done by the individual, but ultimately, it has to be the couple working together and wanting to understand each other, wanting to understand and be empathic to the other's emotions.
- Lee: Give me a feel for what happens. A couple is in your office; they've been having a lot of conflict. They're not happy; maybe they're on the verge of divorce. Things are just melting down. I can't imagine that you say, "Okay, well, be more mindful. Think about what you're thinking." How do you get in there and get them started heading in this direction?

Jessica: It begins on the very basic level of doing it during times of non-conflict. What I mean by that is you find a space to practice mindfulness. That could be just simply checking in and labeling your thoughts and your emotion to understand how you feel in the moment when you're not in conflict and you're not already upset. The couple can do this together.

The other thing I ask couples to do is to take time to notice your partner. When you're getting ready in the morning to go to work or when you're sharing a meal together, look at your partner. How does he or she hold his fork? Which leg do they cross over the other one when they're sitting on the couch? It's little things like that where you begin to reconnect with your partner, to really start to notice them, to know how they respond to situations, to notice how they move and use their bodies to communicate.

Lee: So just paying a lot more attention to them. As I said, this is Episode Number 181, so I've talked to 180 different experts. Listening to you, I will say that we're out there a little bit in the Twilight Zone. That's extreme, but this feels very touchy-feely. Some experts come in here and it's just very practical.

You've been doing this for a while. You're an expert at this. Does this change a marriage? I know that a lot of other stuff they say is going to work doesn't work. What are you seeing with mindfulness in marriages?

Jessica: I see quite a few things. I see that when couples are not connected with each other, when they're mindless rather than mindful, again, it causes a lot of distress. This distress leads to increased anxiety, increased depression, increased use of substances, and it ruins the relationship right at the core.

Mindfulness actually provokes more stress release. It also provokes more well-being, whether it's physical or emotional. It helps you resolve conflicts because you become more objective and you become more of an outside observer of your relationship.

Lee: So you can see the crazy stuff you're doing rather than being a part of it, I guess.

Jessica: Exactly.

Lee: That does make a lot of sense. Once you're sucked in, it's so hard to make a change. But if you can see it yourself, if you can see the things that you're doing that make no sense, I guess it does make it a lot easier for you to be able to stop doing it.

Jessica: By taking a step back, you begin to notice the patterns, the destructive path you've been on thus far. It's at that time when you start to notice and accept that there is a problem that you can begin to change it.

Lee: From the standpoint of figuring this out, I think a lot of folks just want a solution. "Okay, solve my problem." I think that's why we see so many people saying, "Prescribe a drug for me," or whatever. "Let's fix this right now." What does it take to go from zero to success using mindfulness? How long does it take? What are you looking at? Give me a feel for that.

Jessica: The level of someone's mindfulness varies from person to person. It's human nature to want to categorize and organize our experiences. The risk is that we become reactive, rather than a less active participant in how we behave or respond to a situation. This is because we've learned to make predictions and assumptions about what we have to expect.

Mindfulness requires some effort. It might seem like a chore at first. However, taking those simple actions of noticing your partner and thinking about what you like about your partner puts you on the path of becoming more mindful. Once you've been practicing mindfulness on a day-to-day level, it becomes second nature. It becomes more unconscious and more natural for you to be mindful of both yourself and your partner.

Lee: Let's say you have your typical couple that has never thought about mindfulness. That's just not on the radar screen. All they're thinking about is that the marriage is in trouble. If they're both really willing to give it a shot and use this approach, what are we looking at in terms of getting the relationship back on track?

I know you're hesitant to answer that and I know it's different for everyone, but give me a feel for, in your experience, what it's going to take to get ourselves out of the craziness and into at least things being functional and not too bad?

Jessica: It's absolutely necessary to have both the commitment to and the practice of these skills. You hear "mindfulness," and it sounds like this looming, kind of obscure topic. It's based on some Eastern philosophy and it might not co-exist with your own beliefs." But really, if you break it down to what is being asked of you, it's simply going back to a time when you felt connected to your partner, when you took the time to do things just because you wanted to. Sending that text or giving them that message, "Hey, I was thinking about you today," or taking time to spend time together doing something fun with family or with friends.

It's taking the couple back to that time to reconnect with why they connected in the first place. I think it's very healthy for a couple to discuss

what their goals are for the relationship and discuss what they want to get out of it. Not only does that give them a sense of ownership, but it gives them a sense of purpose.

Lee: What if one partner really isn't interested in this idea? Is that "game over?" Do you have to head in a different direction with this idea, or can you do something?

Jessica: I totally understand and appreciate that question. Yes, it is more difficult when there's one partner who is more committed than the other. For the individual, it's very beneficial to be mindful just on your own, but as far as the couple goes, what you really have to connect to is what the person wants to get out of the relationship.

Do they want to stay in the relationship? That's also really important because that's going to affect what their commitment is, what their level of interest in participating in therapy is and wanting to reconnect with their partner. You have to remember that relationships are reciprocal; you get out of it what you put in.

Lee: Right. I worry, though, that if you have somebody who is just too enmeshed in the upset and can't step back from it, they may just not see that. But it is what it is.

Jessica: It might mean that they have to do some more individual work before they can connect with their partner. Many times when I work with couples and I see them both together as well as individually. It's to take time to check in and know what those triggers are and why those triggers are continually being pushed and why we're reliving those past events over and over again and becoming emotionally aroused by it.

Lee: I like your approach. It's very appealing to jump on the bandwagon behind something that sounds like the quick, easy, simple solution to all of your problems. At some level, I think all of us know that most of that stuff doesn't work. We know that at some level, but we love the idea of trying it. Your approach sounds very rational and reasonable and makes a lot of sense.

Other than what you've told us about mindfulness, what else is important for us to know today?

Jessica: I want to speak more on your comment just then. Noticing what you're doing to make matters worse in a relationship is important because the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. You really have to define what the goals are for the relationship. Do they want to spend time together? Do they want to

reconnect with their partner? You have to jump off at some point, and it's really important to establish right at the beginning what the goals are.

As far as couples who have a lot of abuse and violence, that's a completely different story. Safety is the utmost important thing. If there is violence or abuse involved in the relationship, it's really important for those individuals to seek out professional help.

Lee: Right. Good stuff. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk us through the process.

Jessica: Thanks for having me.

Lee: It's terrific, and it really does make you think. I appreciate it.

If you'd like to find out more about Dr. Jessica Barry, you can visit the website at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. The office in Cary, North Carolina can be reached at 919-467-7777.

Thank you all so much for listening in today. I really appreciate it. If you have feedback or comments I would very much like to hear them. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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