

Lee: Couples conquering conflict, this is Stay Happily Married, Episode 200.

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 am Lee Rosen, and I am your host today, welcome to the show. Is your marriage strong enough to withstand the forces working against it? Many couples, the lucky ones, never have to do much when working on their marriage. Perhaps, it's luck, or maybe, it's genuine compatibility. These couples aren't the norm. Normal couples will fight, they'll bicker and yell and they'll do it often. The question is can your marriage survive these hiccups, and are you handling the situation in a way that could damage your relationship even further.

Today, Jeff Levy joins us to give us the inside scoop on how to handle messy marital situations and avoid the formation of negative habits. Jeff has his masters degree in clinical psychology and has been a licensed marriage and family therapist for 25 years. Jeff has a private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. It's called Carolina Counseling and Wellness Center where he specializes in couples counseling and uses his loving marriage of 25 years as his inside source for information. Jeff, welcome to the show. I am so glad you could join us.

Jeff: Well, thank you, Lee. I'm glad to be here.

Lee: Well, I really want to dig into this topic, couples conquering conflict. I like that title, and I think that's exactly what we're here to do. What do you see being the starting point for the conflict in relationships? Where does that all begin?

Jeff: Well, everyone experiences conflict in life situations internally and externally in our relationships with other people. The real question is how are you as an individual, or as a couple, going to handle the conflict. It may be that in the beginning of a relationship, in the romantic glow of things, people gloss over the flaws or expect them to change, or there are so many positive interactions that some destructive fighting is tolerable. But over time if couples don't learn to manage conflict well, then areas of conflict may remain unsolved and take a toll on the relationship, undermining the sense of intimacy and positive connection.

Lee: Is the conflict inevitable with time? Do you think that it's just destiny for all relationships, or are there warning signs that it's coming? What's the deal with all of that?

Jeff: Well, before I answer that question, let me try to introduce and emphasize another way of thinking about the problem of couple conflict. Of course, the better the problem definition, the more likely the couple will make progress at solving the problem. In both my personal and professional experience, it seems to me that the issues couples are in conflict about, be they large or small, sex, money, what TV show to watch, are a problem certainly. But when conflict resolution goes poorly, the problem often becomes the attempted solution. The angry fighting, the avoiding, the withdrawal, and the cut-offs.

This is not just my idea, but it's part of family systems theory. In other words, people are using the wrong tools, an adversarial approach to try to resolve conflicts in intimate social relationships. Using the wrong tools for any task makes the task more difficult, if not impossible. Same thing with couple conflict resolution. And there are serious side effects to going adversarial that tend to make things even worse.

Getting back to your original question, yeah, I think conflict is inevitable so it's a matter, as I said before, how you handle it. I do see lots of couples struggling with issues of basic trust, particularly infidelity or other activities that leave, at least, one partner feeling betrayed. Sex, money, parenting conflicts, these are pretty common topics for discussion. A lot of it boils down to just not feeling cared about. In terms of emotional themes, a very common dynamic has one partner feeling the other doesn't care, while the second partner feels that they cannot please the first no matter what they do.

It's important to note that how the couple engages in conflict, there are roles that each person assumes and how they behave tends to remain the same regardless of the content, be it a big issue or a minor squabble. Of course, big issues are much more highly charged and have a greater felt impact but until the couple works out how to have a productive conflict, they're going to be in trouble. Engaging in power struggles and painful devaluing and destructive interactions.

Lee: OK, makes sense. What do you think, I'm curious, I think most people know that they're not always going to get along, I think we all come into a marriage expecting that we're going to have to work through some issues. What I'm wondering is how does the conflict impact the individual emotionally? What do you see as being the impact of the conflict?

Jeff: Well, of course, when conflict arises there's often a full range of feelings involved, some more in the foreground than others, and expressing some or all of these feelings is usually part of a healthy resolution process over time. This is not just a cognitive transaction, it's an emotional transaction, and the goal is for couples to actually feel closer along the way and at the end of the resolution process. Ideally, conflict is just another form of intimacy, not an alienating, despairing experience. However, when conflict goes awry and escalates, then the couple has two problems, the original unresolved issue and then the over layer or added fact that you just treated each other so badly. The second problem is usually worse and more debilitating than the first. This is where the hurt feelings, the anger and confusion intensifies.

Lee: Right. You know, you see couples, there are these couples that just bicker about everything. I have some friends that, I remember riding in the car with them, and it was like they would fight about the directions for how to get to the restaurant. I mean, nothing was too small to inspire an argument. It seemed like the things they were fighting about were not really big deal issues, they were sort of non-issues. What is it that causes people to just get into that pattern of fighting continuously about everything? Where does that come from?

Jeff: That's a good question. I'm not thinking there's one cause for that. But unresolved conflict within the relationship causes tension, most of us have had that experience, life stresses elsewhere cause tension, people may not be aware of underlying issues or not know how to fully express themselves very well. We need time bickering as the tension kind of leaks out. I want to highlight that from my point of view. The difficulty people encounter managing conflict is about a deficit in learning, not a sign of some inherent inadequacy. Whoever teaches us to communicate effectively, regulate emotion, comfort ourselves in healthy ways, these are basic life skills and ego strengths that people are expected to pick up almost by osmosis.

There's no reason that someone shouldn't just know how to do these things. On the contrary, we need good role models and teachers. In fact, part of a healing experience that enables individuals to have full and rich relationships often means they recover from deep, usually early wounds around self-image represented by thoughts like, there's something wrong with me, I'm inadequate, I'm bad. These harsh self judgments just lead to painful emotions, defensive reactions, like projecting blame, and self-defeating behavior.

Lee: So, a lot of people just never learn these skills. I mean, they just didn't have adequate teaching, I guess, throughout their lives. That's a fascinating observation. Do you see a lot of cases in your practice where the issues that are underlying the cause of the conflict just never get resolved, they just sort of lie dormant?

Jeff: Well, I think it's safe to say that couples who try to clean up the process create, A) the greater sense of trust and emotional safety, become more open and vulnerable with each other, and usually make significant gains, leading to a deepening of the relationship. They can learn to collaborate and work together to resolve differences as well as just have fun and more often good times. How far couples progress in therapy depends. Motivation and commitment to working on the marriage are important factors.

Sometimes, the initial focus in therapy is about motivation, and that focus can lead to increased commitment, at least, for a period of time where people suspend judgment based on past experiences and try new directions. If there is a stuckness in the therapy process, this could mean that important issues are not being talked about or addressed, and it's up to the therapist to help a couple explore that possibility.

Lee: Interesting. So, if they're stuck, there are these sort of underlying issues that are not getting resolved. If you don't get them resolved, what sort of outcome can you expect? Where is that going to go?

Jeff: Couples therapy is usually a stabilizing force, reducing the sense of crisis so that couples can work more effectively on reconnecting in more satisfying ways. When couples do break up, whether they have sought psychotherapy help or not, it's usually due to a repetitive pattern in the relationship that's unsatisfying rather than a single new problem or condition that arises. Perhaps, the current stressor has intensified things, the

repetition despite various attempts to make things better eventually undermines the relationship. It creates a sense of frustration and hopelessness, where one or both people decide to end things.

That being said, it's often true, like the old song suggests, breaking up is hard to do. So, it's not terribly unusually to see break-ups and reconciliations being part of the overall pattern that couples present, reflecting an ongoing ambivalence about one another.

Lee: OK. I'm thinking as you talk, you've mentioned some of the more obvious triggers for conflict, you know, the money issues, sex issues, I guess kid issues, we haven't really dug into that, but are there some more common, are there common triggers that are not as easy to anticipate that you see causing conflict in the relationship?

Jeff: Well, it's probably safe to say that everyone has areas of sensitivity that become triggers in relating to others leading to conflicts that may seem to spiral out of control. The particular areas of sensitivity in a given person usually relate to the painful experiences of the past, often going back to childhood, that remain unresolved. For example, if someone had a very critical father and then they perceive they're made as being critical, this can trigger intense feelings of inadequacy and rejection associated with early experience accompanied by angry or depressive emotions.

While the reaction is understandable, given the history, people benefit from learning how to moderate and reproduce the reaction. That can mean soothing themselves in healthy ways, maintaining perspective and balanced thinking, grounding themselves in the present moment instead of the remembered past, and asserting so that they can resolve conflicts more effectively and find more meaningful and loving ways to relate. We are really moving towards what psychologists would call an adaptive response, that's a response that's fitting and effective for this moment.

There are many good psychological tools that can help people rein in and resolve emotional reactivity, increase their general sense of well-being, and engage other people's cooperation, in creating a more harmonious family situation. Clearly, no one really wants to suffer. We just don't always realize that there are other options and ways to create cohesive relationships. Relationships that may be very, very different from the family relationships we experienced growing up or even from our previous relationships.

Lee: I know that fights are not always about the things that trigger the fight. You might see a couple where, suddenly, there's this big argument about the bed not being made, but we know that bed is not really the source of that argument. Why is it that we don't seem to react at the issue bothering us and that we do end up reacting to these trivial things that trigger the argument?

Jeff: Well, Lee, usually there's an element of what psychologists would call displacement in this tendency. That is, the person is upset about one thing, but the upset is displaced to something else. It's really a defense mechanism which functions to protect us from painful feelings and thoughts. The person is usually not aware, or only vaguely aware, of

what's really bothering him or her at that moment. The behavior reflects a common perception or underlying belief that I offer to help people undo in the therapy process.

The conflict is basically messy, painful, destructive, and to be avoided. So, there can be a tendency to defend against, to avoid or suppress conflicted interpersonal feelings or thoughts, the suppression leads to a build-up of pressure, which then is unleashed in some way when the proverbial last straw occurs. This commonly seen suppressant, explode cycle becomes part of the vicious cycle of dysfunctional communication. When the partner on the receiving end of the anger, for example, judges the other person as irrational and discounts the upset without further exploration, thereby escalating things further.

Lee: Right. I've lived through the judging your spouse as irrational and seeing things get escalated. That is no fun at all. What is the pattern, what is the typical fighting pattern and the response? How does that... I love your sort of scientific approach to the whole thing and I'm wondering, what's the pattern that you see in the fight?

Jeff: Well, let me take some time to answer the essential question because a possible solution is embedded in the answer. First of all, a gut wrenching downward spiral is a good description of what happens and what people actually experience. In contrast, what most people want to experience and want to have more of is a responsive interaction, which is an upward spiral. I love you, you love me and there's a give and take that's mutually rewarding, reciprocal, and self-reinforcing.

Now, the emotional reactive cycle that we want to move away from can be thought about in a number of different ways. One way that many people can relate to is to categorize the reactive behaviors along the passive to aggressive continuum. At the aggressive polarity, partners may be angry, attacking, accusatory or critical. At the passive end of the spectrum, partners shut down, withdraw and often enact their feelings later in an indirect passive-aggressive way. For example, by withholding love and affection, while denying any upset.

Although partners may vary in their expression of aggression or passivity at any given phase of the cycle, there is a consistently dominant pattern that I've witnessed over the 25 years I've been working with couples. That is, for most of the heterosexual couples I have worked with, when in conflict the woman is typically in the angry/critical role while the male is typically going to withdraw and go passive/aggressive. Of course, the roles can be reversed, or the couple can be mutually angry or mutually withdrawn when in conflict, but this is what I actually most typically see.

Another useful way of describing the angry, withdrawing pattern, and I'm certainly not suggesting any judgment or assignment of blame in this description, is that it takes the form of a parent to child interaction. There's nothing inherently wrong with that kind of interaction among adults. In fact, it can be quite satisfying. If one partner, at a particular moment, is feeling scared or needy and asks for a hug and the other partner gives a hug, everyone could be quite happy with that. But when partners go parent to child when in

conflict, it's destructive. The very form of the interaction creates resistance and upset and the ensuing power struggle sidetracks any attempt to work out a solution.

For example, if one partner tells the other what they should be doing, the second partner may very well react against the directive, implying you can't tell me what to do, even though the suggestion may be a very good one. An alternative is assertive adult to adult interaction, which includes being respectful and empathetic without judgment or directives. Even as you state your needs or wishes or give feedback, it encourages collaboration, and generally works much, much better.

Lee: Well, since you can see the pattern and you can teach it to us, I mean that's very interesting. Does that mean that there's a way to sort of stop the pattern at the beginning, when it's all starting, or is that a bad idea? Are you really better off to let it play out a little bit before trying to correct the fact that you're heading in the wrong direction?

Jeff: Yeah, I think you had it right the first time that maybe, it's better to head it off but it certainly seems that way. Let me go further into solution territory though before I detail that. In terms of breaking the cycle, the first thing to realize about the negative interaction around a conflict, let's call it angry/withdrawn for now, is that the interaction is circular. In fact, that's the family system's name for that principal, circularity. Circular means that each person reacts to the other in a vicious cycle. Partner one reacts to partner two and two reacts to partner one's reaction and so on.

The important thing for partners to remember is that a circle has no real beginning or end. In the negative escalating process of angry/withdrawn, each partner projects blame and arbitrarily decides that the process started with the other person. It is true that the anger becomes a trigger for the partner on the receiving end to withdraw, as is their habit when feeling attacked. And then, the withdrawal becomes a trigger for anger in the other partner as that partner may feel abandoned. However, blaming each other for the circular interaction only results in further escalation as each person rationalizes their own bad behavior because they have been treated badly.

Partners are now engaged in a vicious cycle that cannot possibly resolve any disagreement in opinion or preference or any upset feelings that have arisen. In fact, as I said before, the couple now has two problems, the original unresolved issue and then the troubled interaction around that issue that breaks down trust and causes further alienation and hopelessness. So, yes, the couple should try to interrupt the pattern before it takes hold. However, an assertive way of relating is not always easy to enact under duress because of the nature of the primitive fight or flight stress reaction that occurs when people are triggered and feel threatened.

So, we want to empower individuals and couples to head off their stress reaction before it takes over. A good analogy would be a situation where we're outside and we see storm clouds forming in the distance. If we know and can observe, just become aware of, the signs that indicate a storm is coming, we can go inside and seek shelter or, at least, get an umbrella so we don't get soaked. Likewise, if each person can anticipate or see forming

their own stress reaction often manifesting as an impulse to fight or flight, attack or withdraw, if they can catch it soon enough, the cortex is still involved and they can head it off, self-soothe and calm down in healthy ways.

And then, reengage their partner in a much more constructive way that has a chance, probably a good chance if a consistent effort is made over time, of succeeding. To elaborate a bit, if partners can catch the stress reaction occurring in the early stages and for them to do that they have to know the signs of their own stress reaction, their behavioral signs, verbal signs, thinking signs, feeling signs, sensation signs in the body. If they can catch it early enough and an agreement can already be in place that allows either partner to initiate what we call a time out, this is best initiated with an "I" statement. Such as, I'm getting angry, I'm feeling anxious, or I'm feeling defensive, followed by, I need a timeout.

Trying to initiate the time out with a "you" statement, you're getting angry, you need a time out, that's usually experience in provoking and mimics and encourages the actual reactive cycle. During the time out, which initially usually entails physical separation, ideally for a specified amount of time, each partner tries to calm down in non-threatening and healthy ways, not by drinking alcohol, for example.

There are many good psychological strategies and tools, even transforming tools, that people can use to stop reacting, regulate emotion, and self-soothe, in preparation in talking about the issue again. Two therapeutic approaches that help people in this regard and are now in the foreground of western psychology are cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness. People can Google these topics to get an idea of how they work and there are many good self-help books covering these issues. What distinguishes a time out from a cut-off is that in the time out process, couples agree to come back and talk about the issues later, again specifying when, if possible, at the onset.

Couples have to go on to develop the collaborative response sets, perhaps with a therapist's help, to actually work through the conflict, but the time out helps settle things down and point things in the right direction. If the stress reaction does take over and the couples polarize, all is not lost. Just as important as heading off the reaction, is learning how to recover from it quickly and get back on track.

A simple, but effective, way to do this is to reflect about your own role in the interaction and apologize for the destructive reaction. You haven't necessarily changed your position about the issues, you're just owning the reaction. Then, an attempt can be made to assert the position and engage in a more constructive dialog seeking win/win outcomes, which in the end are not experienced as distasteful compromises.

Lee: OK. I buy all of that and that's good advice, I think, for a lot of couples, but what about, what do you do if, I'm taking the good advice you're offering, but I have a partner that doesn't want to make any effort to sort of calmly communicate about the problem and is engaging in these sort of defensive attacks that you're talking about. What do I do when I'm not getting any cooperation?

Jeff: OK. That's not unusual. So, when a partner is in reactive mode, fight or flight has taken over and that is probably not the best time to renegotiate the process. Coping without reacting is a better strategy at that time. You could float some trial balloons but number one rein in your own reaction and try to empathize. Reflect back to the partner, you're understand they are very upset and express your concern and some understanding of the problem as they see it without challenging their position initially. If you can tolerate it, it's safe physically, of course, you may allow them to vent.

You can also try and give some feedback in a non-accusatory way about your perception of feeling criticized or attacked and the impact, for example, one [inaudible 26:21] attack back in the hope the partner will detach enough from the reaction to gain perspective and make a shift in their approach. In general, if either partner is feeling attacked or defensive in the dialog, it's time to shift away from the content of the conflict and instead refocus on the process itself to recreate a sense of emotional safety that allows the dialog to proceed with openness and creativity.

If you can't make progress in these directions during the upset, then you can settle them as in a timeout. What makes this work is what I said before, no one really wants to suffer. People are just looking for other options. If you can suggest at a calmer time that there's a better way to go about things and you enact that as sort of a stance, regardless of what the other person is doing, that's the most important part here. That you set for yourself individual goals that are in the assertive ballpark and enact that, regardless of what the other partner is doing. You stay adult regardless of what the other partner is doing, then the chances are your partner is going to come around over time because no one really wants to suffer, they just don't know what else to do. You're also saying to them directly and through your behavior that you're only interested in win/win outcomes. So, that's an invitation that very few people, you may not trust it initially, but that's an invitation very few people can resist.

Lee: Right, right.

Jeff: You're on their side, too. You're asserting, you are telling them what you feel but you're trying to understand them and you're not satisfied with an outcome where you get your way but they're unhappy.

Lee: Right, right. And I think it makes a lot of sense but we both know, and I mean, I'm married, I've been married more than 20 years. I know when things go awry, they really go awry. What benefit do we get out of coming and talking to a professional, such as yourself, when you're dealing with this kind of conflict? There are a lot of us, I think, have trouble doing it on our own.

Jeff: Sure. And that is a good idea to come in. And as I said before, it's easier to come in if you see this as a sort of a classroom of sorts. You're learning new skills and people are willing to seek education for almost anything, but therapy somehow has a stigma attached to it. Some of the benefits of coming to therapy is that rather than, I think, one of the

things that people dread is that couples therapy is going to stir things up, and in my view an important role of therapy is to provide a container that's a safe place to open up issues, express feelings and thoughts, brainstorm, and find that experience to be not only bearable but actually enriching and enlivening. Each couple is different and faces unique challenges, but in my experience most of the time sessions can have good closure and actually be relieving, moving things forward. The therapist is there to facilitate that.

Lee: Right, right. Good advice. I think makes a lot of sense, it just doesn't seem like a lot of us are able just not able to sit down...

Jeff: Yeah, you just can't contain it so the therapist, that's the therapist's job. To help keep it contained because you want to have problems that don't ruin your day, or the next hour. You have to contain the conflict so it can be resolved over time. Most conflicts aren't going to resolve instantly. So, you're put in a loving, compassionate context.

Lee: Well, Jeff, we covered a lot of ground today. I really appreciate you taking the time to be with us on the show. Thank you so much for sharing your experience and your expert advice. I appreciate it.

Jeff: Thank you, Lee. It's a pleasure.

Lee: To find out more about Jeff Levy or his practice, Carolina Counseling and Wellness Center, you can visit their website at www.couplescounseling.com. I'll put a link to that on the show notes, or you can reach them by telephone at 919-363-0150.

Thank you so much for joining us today, I hope that you'll be back with us next week. We always love hearing from you. If you have any feedback or suggestions, criticisms, you name it, we'd love to hear from you on our listener comment line at 919-256-3083. You can also email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen, until next time, stay happily married.

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