

Anna: Are you the eye in the storm? This is Stay Happily Married, episode 235.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. If you were the reason for the fighting and the tension in your marriage, would you be able to admit it? One of the biggest challenges facing couples today is their inability to truly hear one another, and recognize the unhealthy communication patterns that develop over time. When such patterns do develop, or have already been developed, the strength of the marriage can take a hit, resulting in distance and contempt between partners. Oftentimes, all each partner really wants is for the other to just understand them. In the midst of arguing over a point, compassion and understanding can sometimes fly out the window.

Our guest today, Leslie Petruk, is a child and family therapist, who is here to discuss the biggest predictors of divorce, but also the key to resolving communication conflicts within a marriage. At her practice in Charlotte, North Carolina, Stepping Stones Counseling and Consulting, she works to help individuals and couples attain more connected and mindful lives. Welcome to the show, Leslie. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Leslie: Thanks for having me.

Anna: Sure. Sure. All right. No one likes to talk about divorce, but to get it out of the way, what are the biggest predictors that you see?

Leslie: I think the main one is when there's a lot of contempt that has developed over time. That really leads to a sense or a feeling of apathy that couples have towards each other. Not having communication, not really communicating in an open, honest way, is certainly a contributor to that. Couples tend to get into patterns that create these communication patterns that are noneffective where they are not hearing each other. Then, over time, they just begin to feel resentful. That leads to contempt and complete disconnection.

Anna: Right. Right.

Leslie: That's a huge one. That's a huge predictor. There are a lot of others as well. Things like, how you approach conflict. If you approach it in a really attacking way, then it's probably going to end in an attacking way. Stonewalling your partner, so when they're trying to talk to you and work through a conflict, if you just stonewall them and won't talk with them, it's another big predictor. Really, how you handle conflict is really important, in terms of determining how well your marriage is going to survive, or how it's going to do.

Anna: Yeah. That's interesting that you brought those up. Specifically, contempt and the stonewalling, because it made me think of, I think it's John Gottman.

Leslie: Yeah.

Anna: He does the four or five horsemen of the Apocalypse, and talking about those are the biggest things that kind of show that a marriage is headed for divorce or some kind of downfall.

Leslie: Yeah. He's done a lot of research. He's a leading expert in relationships and has really done a lot of research on this. He has a list of things that are definite predictors that they have found of divorce, and those are all part of that.

Anna: Right. Right. Now, of course, it's not a guarantee, but with divorce being so common, it seems like these factors and problems within marriages are becoming more obvious as red flags for separation. Is that the case with the people that you see? Are these people who are divorcing generally having the same types of issues?

Leslie: Basically, it all comes down to the same thing. Everybody that I work with, I'm using the same model of helping them to really identify what's getting triggered in them. Obviously, every case is different. In general, when you see a couple come into the therapy office, first of all, they're coming in a long time after when they should have been. Usually, couples wait until their marriage is in great distress before they walk into a therapist's office. A lot of the problems that they've had have become bigger and bigger over time. You have to kind of roll back and go back, and really start at the basics. Really, a lot of the big problems are stemming from communication issues and the patterns, the unhealthy patterns of communication that they get into, where they're really not understanding each other, not feeling connected, and really just not feeling heard by the other.

Anna: Right. Maybe, could you give us sort of an example of a scenario, a mock scenario about these unhealthy communication patterns? You mentioned something about the triggers. That's interesting to me too, how couples might do that to each other.

Leslie: Yeah. For example, a wife might say to her husband, "I'd really like to spend the holidays with my family this year for Christmas." The husband might say, "OK." Then, not respond to that and not take the steps to make that happen, to communicate with their family, "We are going to our other side of the family's for Christmas this year." First of all, the wife didn't really communicate, "OK. Here's what I want you to do. I would like for you to call your parents, your family, tell them we're going to be with my family this year, so that they don't expect to come here for the holidays." Because the husband hasn't taken the steps, but in the wife's mind, she thought they should, she gets triggered and activated and just says, "Just forget it. We'll just go here, or stay here with your family." Then, feels resentful. That's kind of an example of a loop that couples get into.

The husband might come back and say, "I didn't realize you wanted me to call right away. I didn't realize that you wanted me to do this right now." Part of it is really learning. The husband may not have been admitting, "I don't really want to go with your family. I want to stay with mine." Maybe, the husband was fearful of telling their family. "If I tell my family, then they're going to be mad at me." Then, he feels like he's caught in between a rock and a hard place. If he's not expressing that and talking to his wife about it, then he just does nothing, then she interprets that as him not respecting her wishes. The intention that both of them have is being missed.

Anna: OK. Yeah.

Leslie: Because they're not really talking about it.

Anna: So it seems like it would be a small issue had they been able to communicate with each other in the proper way or a way that the other would respond to.

Leslie: Right.

Anna: In some situations, it's almost like it's not about exactly what you're saying, but the point that you're trying to make and how you say it. I guess, for women, sometimes they think that maybe a man will just know what I want him to do, but I guess that's not the case. You have to be very specific, or whatever.

Leslie: Exactly. Communicating our expectations, being really specific about, "Here's what I expect, based on this request," because you can walk away feeling disrespected, when that wasn't your spouse's intention at all. They're just feeling stuck in between a rock and a hard place. Really communicating what we expect is something that gets missed a lot.

Anna: Yeah. What about the challenges? What kind of other challenges do you see couples facing? I guess, when it comes to communicating and their different communication patterns.

Leslie: I think a lot really boils down to communication and getting triggered by each other. We trigger parts in our partner that are maybe, parts that are wounded parts in us from before. We respond to a situation based on the previous woundings or hurts that we've had. That gets you into this dance with your partner, because then they respond from their wounded or hurt parts. Then, you just get into this gridlock. When you're in that place, when you're in the reactive place, or when you've just shut down, then you're really not hearing each other at all. Part of learning how to communicate with your spouse is being able to set aside the parts of you that get triggered and activated and reactive, and to really just listen to them with an open heart and hear what they're trying to tell you, and what the message is underneath it, to really hear it and understand it. A lot of times, once you really hear and understand the intention and what the message underneath it really is, then it gives a whole new perspective to the spouse. They are not interpreting the behaviors and making assumptions about what their intention was.

Anna: That's a big one right there. I think assumptions, for sure.

Leslie: Absolutely.

Anna: Just assuming what the person is thinking, what they're feeling, what they want, what they're going to say. That could probably cause a lot of problems, too. Right?

Leslie: Yeah. A lot of mind reading happens with couples, where, "He should know that I didn't want to do that. He should know this, or she should know that." They can't know unless you're telling them.

Anna: Exactly. That's the reality.

Leslie: That's critical.

Anna: You do have to be specific.

Leslie: Absolutely.

Anna: Say what you mean, mean what you say.

Leslie: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Anna: What's the problem that can potentially arise when partners get into that pattern of mind reading, like we were talking about, or assuming?

Leslie: I think that's what can lead to some of those other things we were talking about earlier, which is contempt and stonewalling, and getting into addressing conflict by attacking, rather than really wanting to listen and communicate and understand one another. It just creates resentment over time. When you begin to assume that you know what your partner is thinking and feeling, and what they're saying and feeling, or saying and what they mean behind what they're saying, then a lot of times, you're coming to inaccurate conclusions. Checking those out is really critical, and saying, "It feels to me like you're thinking this. Is that correct?" Giving your partner an opportunity to correct it if you're wrong because if you're coming to your own conclusions, they're probably not accurate, and it will create a rift and disconnection in the marriage.

Anna: Right. Yeah. I can definitely see that. Assuming can definitely be taken too far then. For some situations, it seems like it would maybe be OK, in some situations, like simple things. She probably wants me to go, maybe not, to the grocery store, something like that. When does that start to pose a bigger problem, the assuming?

Leslie: I think that when you're kind of just going through your day and assuming that your partner is understanding your expectations and your intentions, that's problematic in and of itself. A lot of times, when you're coming to your own conclusions, you're also reacting to those conclusions, when you have interactions when you do communicate with each other. As distress gets higher, then you are reacting from those parts that have made all these assumptions and conclusions. You might be reacting in a way that you wouldn't, if you knew what your partner's intentions and thoughts really were. It's just really critical that you don't assume everything about the other. It's not always easy. It requires a lot of intentionality and being really aware of what you're thinking and feeling. Then, just putting it out there as a possibility, rather than deciding that you've accurately interpreted something.

Anna: Right. Yeah. Do you think it's beneficial for couples to actually sit down, and maybe have an open conversation about their expectations? Maybe, even some of those on the negative side, maybe talking about some of those triggers that get them. Is it helpful for them to actually sit down and address them all in a way that they can just have them all out on the table and talk about them?

Leslie: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that's one of the ways to avoid resentment and contempt building and growing. If you let your partner know, "When you say this to me, or when you treat me in this way, this is how I feel as a result of that. I feel like you're telling me that you don't respect me, and that I'm not important, and my thoughts and feelings don't matter," or whatever it is. To really say, "When this happens, when you do this, I feel this way," or, "The way you're talking to me right now is really making me feel angry, because it feels like you're accusing me." Really being able to speak for those parts of you that are getting triggered, rather than reacting from them. Doing that by sitting down and just having a conversation, not in the heat of the moment, when you're in the midst of the conflict. Sometimes, it's better too. Or to say, "I can't." If you're feeling too reactive, and you don't feel like you can speak for the part of you, to say, "I really need to cool off and then come back, and we can talk about this." Then, naming what got triggered inside of you that caused the reaction.

Anna: Yeah. It's interesting that you're talking about the speaking for the parts of you, rather than from the parts of you maybe that are hurt or sad or upset or angry. That makes a lot of sense actually. If everyone just, if you could kind of wrap your mind around that, start to do things like that. Be more mindful of how you are speaking. I think that could definitely makes things a little bit easier for couples.

Leslie: Absolutely. It creates a space that doesn't feel like you're attacking. You're just speaking for a part of you, and you're just wanting your partner to hear it. It definitely allows more space for the discussion to happen.

Anna: I know that you probably worked with some couples on stuff like this. You probably see families, couples, and individuals. How difficult can it be for couples, married or not married even, to completely change their communication habits and patterns, if they've had these unhealthy ones?

Leslie: Naturally, it can be really challenging. Change is possible, and that's why I do what I do. It's really based on how motivated a couple is. They really have to understand that it's a process. They didn't get to that place, where they are in their relationship, overnight. There have been patterns that have developed over time. Once you are able to really sit down with a couple and help them learn how to hear and listen to one another, it can be really transformational, in terms of them understanding each other on a different level. Also, learning a whole new way to communicate and really focus on themselves, rather than their partner. Which is really more about turning it around and saying, "OK. I feel this way when these circumstances happen. Part of the reason this upsets me so much is because when I was a kid, it could be connected to an earlier experience. When I was a kid, my dad treated me that way. Or when I was a kid, my mom treated me that way. I always felt isolated or hurt or whatever, when that happened." Really having those discussions and understanding what they're connected to for you, will help your partner relate to you in a different way. It will also help you relate to yourself in a different way.

Anna: It seems like to fix the communication problems, you have to start communicating better, I guess, in a more appropriate way.

Leslie: Absolutely. Also, knowing. Absolutely. Really, the first step is knowing what is getting activated and triggered inside of you.

Anna: Right.

Leslie: When we get into these communication loops, what is getting activated inside of me? How can I not act from that part, but speak for it?

Anna: Right. Do you think that, if couples are in a pretty bad situation, do you think the best thing for them to do to start on the journey of resolution or fixing the problem would be to sit down with a therapist or a counselor? Or maybe try starting it themselves? I don't know. It seems like it could potentially be a little tricky.

Leslie: Yeah. It can be. I think it really depends on whether you're able to sit down and try a new way of communicating and understanding on your own. Some couples can do that. Others really need a third party to help them learn how to do it, without getting triggered and reactive. Sitting down with a therapist can certainly be helpful if you find that you're stuck in a pattern that you just really can't get

yourself out of. Really, just learning about the triggers that activate your partner, and that you get activated by, and really learning how to identify those is huge.

Anna: Right. Definitely. Leslie, is there anything else that we should tell the listeners?

Leslie: I guess, the main thing I would say is that we all have the capacity to live and be in a place of calm and connectedness. I think everybody wants that in a marriage. They're wanting intimacy and connection, and to be loved by their partner. The trap that couples tend to get into is to believe that their partner can love them the way nobody else in the world has and can redeem them. Part of the therapeutic process too, is really not placing that expectation on your partner, but learning how to take care of the parts of yourself that are wounded and need healing. Then, you can better connect with your partner. You can learn how to speak for those parts, rather than from them. There is a process to get through that, that sometimes couples do need help with. Underneath it all, I think couples always have the intention and the desire to want to connect.

Anna: Oh, yeah.

Leslie: It's just that they get stuck in these patterns that start to kind of tear away and chip away at the relationship. It's all about intentionality, and really wanting to be intentional about the marriage and the relationship. Without intentionality, then you can repair it. I think that's important for couples to know.

Anna: Definitely. There is a path to healing and making things better.

Leslie: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Anna: Leslie, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Leslie: It was my pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Leslie and her practice, Stepping Stones Counseling and Consulting, you can visit her website at www.steppingstonesnc.com, or call 704-335-6100 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com, or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.