

Stephanie: Interrogation versus conversation. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 262.

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

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. When tensions are high, do you get to the source or avoid the problem altogether? It's not called the art of conversation for nothing.

Some things in life come easily, but conversation isn't always one of them. When issues arise, communication tends to take a back seat in an attempt to avoid a potential debate match.

A life spent employing your best avoidance tactics can make it difficult to tackle tough issues and topics with your partner. How do you get to the root of the issue when it's such a fine line to navigate the road between interrogation and conversation? Our guest today is here to help us answer that very question.

Specializing in couples and relationship issues for the past 15 years, Dr. Susan Orenstein is director of Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Receiving her doctorate in counseling psychology from Temple University, she's pursued advanced training in couples counseling and family mediation. Susan has been happily married to the same man for the past 24 years.

Welcome back to the show, Susan. I'm very glad you could join us.

Susan: Thanks, Stephanie.

Stephanie: So when you look at Facebook and you look at Twitter, you'd think that our world today really doesn't have any secrets or any taboo topics that we don't go over. What is it that couples are finding so difficult to talk about and discuss?

Susan: That's interesting. In some ways, you are absolutely right. There's an explosion of information people share with very little boundaries on Facebook. But if you notice on Facebook and Twitter, things like that, generally people are sharing their happy photos that they went to Fort Lauderdale and got a suntan or got a tattoo or things like that. They're not really sharing their intimate, personal, more vulnerable feelings.

And so that's still what couples really have to do to feel close is share some of those more vulnerable, personal feelings. Even when Facebook's around, even when everybody seems to be spilling everything, it doesn't get easier when you're talking about the person that you love the most and sharing something very personal.

Stephanie: So these topics that are difficult for people to discuss, are they always something that has to be something that's a vulnerability or something that's a negative topic that's causing them to stress?

Susan: That's generally what I found is people are feeling vulnerable, and they feel like they have something to lose. Either they're going to feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about something that is pretty difficult or sensitive in their relationship.

So it could be about their spending or their eating or their sex life or maybe their ambitions. Whatever it is, they might feel some shame around it or some concern that their partner will judge them.

Stephanie: And for the tactics that these people are taking, what are they doing exactly to avoid discussing any of these issues that they just kind of aren't willing to discuss or they're feeling vulnerable if they were to discuss?

Susan: Sometimes people talk around topics because there's part of them that really wants the partner to understand, but they don't quite have the courage to be direct. So they'll drop hints about what's important to them, or they will sometimes be sarcastic as a way to hint that something's bothering them.

Sometimes they'll just shut down, and they'll avoid their partner. They'll watch a lot of TV, or they'll be out of the house a lot because they're wanting to avoid these difficult conversations.

So I think if the people are giving hints, it seems like they really want to get close, they just don't know how. And the people that are shutting down are feeling more hopeless that it's just not going to go well so why bother.

The truth is what I've seen a lot with couples is with so many of these tough issues, if you create these safe conditions, people can regain hope, and they can develop some tools to speak directly. They don't have to give the hints.

Stephanie: And so when they're avoiding these tough topics, and they're kind of going around, and you have one partner who's hinting that they do want to discuss this, what happens to the relationship there when the couple isn't discussing these items? How do things tend to end up?

Susan: There's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding. So I see that couples will get angry at each other because they think somebody didn't unload the dishwasher, and they didn't unload the dishwasher, but they think that that's really what the argument's about.

It gets very confusing and crazy making because people are arguing or being tense or maybe erupting about things that seem kind of inconsequential or minor. And so sometimes they'll think their partner is just acting crazy. Why do they have such a strong reaction to this little thing? So there's a lot of miscommunication and misunderstandings and people walking around being really baffled.

And so often I hear my husband or my wife or my partner is crazy. They're unreasonable. They're PMS-ing, or they're going through menopause or they have a midlife crisis. And then I'll meet the other partner, and they might say the same thing whereas when I meet each of these

people individually, they seem like very, very reasonable people. So I think what's going on is a lot of miscommunication.

Stephanie: A lot of false triggers, it sounds like.

Susan: Yes.

Stephanie: Okay. And how common an issue would you say this is among couples?

Susan: Extremely common.

Stephanie: And is it something that's common because it's one person's . . . you know, this is their pattern, their habit? Or is it kind of a result of a combination of the two people, maybe one being too forceful, and the other one clams up, or what do you typically see?

Susan: You could see it play out in a lot of different ways, but couples tend to set a tone for each other. So if certain things become taboo, they will learn to avoid things. But I think you're right. There is that other dynamic where one person wants to force a topic, and the other person wants to avoid it. And that's tricky, too. So, yeah, I think it can play out in a lot of different ways.

Stephanie: And so if this is left to kind of fester and recycle, this constant kind of pattern of cat and mouse, what are the long-term and, I guess, the short-term effects, negative and if there are any positive, it doesn't quite sound like there would be, but what would the effects be of continuing this game back and forth?

Susan: Frustration. Each partner feels really frustrated. Sometimes I'll hear people say they feel defeated or hopeless. They're living in this tense environment. And there can be a lot of anger and resentment and loneliness. So neither partner is getting their needs met.

And we are really programmed, our biology is programmed to have a sense of attachment and closeness and a bond with our partner. And it's just an innate need like we need water and we need food.

So when people aren't having that closeness on a regular basis, and actually they're having the opposite, they're having tension, it can easily affect their emotional and physical health, their concentration at work, their tolerance for stress. All kind of reverberations when people aren't feeling connected to their partner.

Stephanie: Okay. And does this situation occur more in newer couples, or is it something that is more typical that you see in couples that have been together longer periods of time? Or is there any kind of correlation?

Susan: It's an interesting question. So first of all, I don't really see too many couples that are early on in the relationship. That could just be my practice. But I think also what the research shows is the first couple years of a relationship, people are really often in bliss, and they're

feeling really good. And I think they're still getting to know each other. And they totally understand that they're getting to know each other.

I think what makes that part of the relationship so healthy is they're wanting to learn about each other. They're saying tell me about this. How did you grow up? What do you think of this? They're wanting that information.

Then when couples have been together a really long time, I think unfortunately what happens is they think they know each other, so they start creating stories. They'll think, well, my partner wouldn't want to do this, or he's going to think this, or he's going to react like this. And they often don't check things out as much. They just go on this story or template they have in their head.

And so, in that way, I think it is more dangerous the longer couples have been together when they're starting to make these assumptions. And they don't even realize they're making assumptions. They're acting as if this is the truth. This is who my partner is. He or she will like this. They'll say no to this. They start to think for them and assume things for them. And that's unfortunate.

Stephanie: Yeah, that familiarity of kind of imposing their idea of what that person is. Okay. So for people who are looking to kind of get out of the cycle, what would be a better, healthier way for couples to resolve this miscommunication or even non-communication?

Susan: This might be a relief and it might be surprising for people to hear, but I think adopting an attitude of not knowing and being okay with not knowing would be a huge step forward in terms of people's mindset of this. Wow, I don't know what my partner will think of this, or I'm not sure if he'll like this or she'll like that. Let me ask. So instead of being an expert on your partner, let them be the expert and you take on much more of a mindset of, wow, I'm curious about that. Maybe I don't know.

And I think that can be really challenging because, Stephanie, I said one of the innate needs we have is a need to connect and to bond and to be close, and that's just hard wired. I think another innate need human beings have is to be right and to feel like they understand things.

And so when I'm giving the suggestion of not knowing, like giving up that story and not knowing and asking your partner, I think then people are faced with the challenge of a little more humility. Okay, maybe I don't know. That can be freeing as well, but it's a big shift for a lot of people.

Stephanie: So how exactly would someone or a couple create a safe environment to begin opening the dialogue and getting themselves open and vulnerable to this conversation?

Susan: Well, you've mentioned the word open a couple times, so I'm going to piggyback on that. And I think to begin these conversations, each partner really has to enter with an open mind and an open heart that they're going to be willing to learn some new things. They're going to be

willing to listen. That doesn't mean they're going to agree to anything, but they're going to be willing to learn, and they're going to be open.

So to create the conditions, I think you have to check in with yourself and say, okay, if I want to make this work and I want to set this up for success, can I go in there with an open and an open heart because that's essential. So that's a work people really need to do personally.

And then if you're clear with yourself, okay, the relationship isn't working, it's frustrating. Let me go in and go in with an open mind. Then the next step would be to gently invite your partner into a conversation. Not demand that he or she come in and talk, not be forceful or aggressive. But say in a very respectful way I've noticed some things in our relationship that seem to be going off track. I'd really like to talk about it. I'd like to hear what you're thinking. Would you be willing to do that with me?

So inviting a person as opposed to demanding is key. And then lastly, what I was going to say, if you have an open mind and you invite your partner, sometimes couples still feel uncomfortable because there's been so much pain, and it just hasn't been safe, and they're really feeling awkward about having some of these serious conversations.

That's where you can schedule an appointment with a couples therapist, with somebody, a neutral third party who has the skills to facilitate these conversations and to make it safe. And so that's something that really can benefit a lot of couples as well.

Stephanie: So when you said it's a lot to do with inviting them into the conversation, I know that phrasing the questions even in a certain way so that they'll be more welcoming to the conversation. They won't feel as though it's an interrogation or that you're forcing them to do anything.

I know that open-ended questions would be the best way of doing that so that they feel they can answer in any way that they need to. Do you have any examples of exactly what couples could use in terms of these open-ended questions to get the conversation started?

Susan: There are some keywords that I know trigger defensiveness, so I can tell people pretty quickly what not to say, and then I can switch over into and give some suggestions. But what I call fighting words are generally why questions, and, of course, what were you thinking questions What were you thinking? Or why did you come home late last night, or why do you talk to me this way?

Generally, when we use why questions, not always, but generally, you've got to be careful because there's often an accusation in there. So stay away from the why or what were you thinking or how could you, that's not going to go well.

Stephanie: That's a popular one. Yeah.

Susan: Yeah. And more open-ended questions would be I'm wondering what you think about that. Could you tell me how you see it, or I'm confused about how that happened. What are your thoughts? What's your experience? What's your perspective?

Where it's not a yes or no and they have to answer like they're on a witness stand, but you're inviting them to share their thoughts, their feelings, their perspective. What's your take on it? What's your recollection of it? We have different ways of remembering it or different ways of thinking about it. How do you think about it?

And then, of course, it's your tone of voice, too. So I could give people the scripts to have open-ended gentle conversations, but if you have a really rough, harsh tone and you're pointing your finger at them, that's not going to work. So you have to look at your non-verbals and your tone of voice and make sure it's all consistently showing a message of open-mindedness and willingness to listen.

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah. And is there anything that partners can do individually on their own that can help to improve these communication issues?

Susan: When I'm working with couples and individually, they are starting to look at themselves and discover their own needs, their own reactions, their own feelings. It just helps the relationship so, so much.

So what I would recommend for individuals, whether their partner wants to go to couples counseling or not, is to be asking themselves, wow, what assumptions am I making? What automatic thoughts do I have, and maybe that's not fair. Let me check that out with my partner because maybe I don't know. So the individuals can really start to be aware of their automatic stories and give their partner the benefit of the doubt and check things out, instead of assuming the worst in keeping with the story.

Stephanie: So it seems like there's a lot of opening up to someone else but also kind of searching inside yourself to see what you're doing. So a lot of vulnerability flying around in this, which I can see would tie back to why this is an issue for a lot of people because, like you said, we love being right.

Susan: We love being right. But on the other hand, I've heard some people talk about relationships and being in relationships as a spiritual kind of endeavor that pushes each person to grow and be better, and there's some humility in that. And there's some, okay, maybe I don't know everything, and maybe I can still learn. So there's the flip side.

The flip side of this hard work and this vulnerability is there are opportunities to discover and to grow even when, and maybe even especially when there are transitions and there's conflict. Those are the opportunities to learn more about yourself, more about your partner, keep growing, keep things fresh.

Stephanie: Okay. And is there anything else that you'd like to mention to anyone today looking to broach these tough issues and topics in a relationship?

Susan: I congratulate people listening to this because it sounds to me like you're wanting to improve your relationship, you care about relationships. And I've been doing this for so many years, and I can't think of anything that I've discovered that's more important than this to really cultivate an ability to love somebody else, to negotiate things, to build relationships. So, this is such a joy. I could talk all day, but I think this is a good place to stop.

Stephanie: Well, Susan, thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today. We really appreciate it.

Susan: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Stephanie: To find out more about Susan Orenstein and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at [orensteinsolutions.com](http://orensteinsolutions.com). That's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N solutions.com, or you can call for an appointment at 919-428-2766.

Thank you again for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at [stayhappilymarried.com](http://stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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