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The Fight That Never Ends

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here in the studio with psychotherapist Stephen Hawthorne. Steven is a licensed clinical social worker. He's been on the faculty at Duke University -- or Duke Medical Center since 1977. He's in private practice in Durham, North Carolina. He's been doing that since 1981; a long time. He works with adults, children, families on issues including sexual dysfunction, chronic illness and marital discord.

He's also taught English as a second language in Cameroon and has worked as a Peace Corps trainer in Quebec, Canada and in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Welcome to the show, Stephen.

Stephen Hawthorne: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen:

Well, I am really glad you could be with us today. You know, all couples -- I've never met a couple that didn't have disagreements and arguments from time to time. That just seems like a normal part of marriage, I guess. But the problem is that many couples -- the problem they have is that they don't ever resolve their conflicts; they just keep on arguing. They're involved in a cycle of arguments and anger and they get more and more distance from one another and the issue never gets resolved.

Let me start off by asking you, is it normal for couples to have disagreements or arguments?

Stephen Hawthorne: Oh, absolutely. You can't live with somebody who's important to you over any period of time without having disagreements.

Lee Rosen: Well, good, because then I guess my marriage is normal.

Stephen Hawthorne: Pretty much like mine.

Lee Rosen: But when do you get to the point where it becomes a problem?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, what happens is we have the hardest time not over-responding to the people who matter the most to us.

Lee Rosen: Right. And we get sucked in. Yeah.

Stephen Hawthorne: We do because we have all our chips on the table. It's hugely important. And so when we're not feeling loved or really solidly connected we get defensive. And as soon as we get defensive, our partners get defensive and then that takes on a life of its own. So that's when it becomes a problem.

Lee Rosen: What do you -- when do you know you're really in trouble? Is it when you see that that same argument is happening time after time?

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah. Probably all of the couples that I see in my practice say essentially that: We have the same argument again and again and again and it goes the same way. We know where it's going to go and it always does. It could be about how to raise the kids or how to spend our money or any number of things that you have to deal with in married life, and basically it never gets resolved because it breaks down. And they know it breaks down and they know how it breaks down; they just don't know quite how to change that.

Lee Rosen: What does it look like? If you're living that life and you're having that argument -- and I guess, like you said, common things, kids, money -- but if you're having that same argument over and over again, what is that cycle like typically? What are people doing and experiencing when they're going through that?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, there's usually one person who is more conflict-avoidant than the other, often husbands because they may, for instance, know they have a temper and if they get into an argument they're going to stay stuff that just makes it worse. So they would prefer to not say much or to actually walk away before they lose it. And it's often times -- not always, sometimes it's a wife who does that, but

usually it's the husband. Women are better at talking, and particularly about relationships, than we men are.

Lee Rosen: Oh, they love to talk.

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, they do. And actually, they connect by talking, whereas we connect by working. And so that creates a certain amount of difficulty across husband and wife lines. And so usually there's one member who is a distancer for a variety of very understandable reasons from my point of view, but not so understandable from his partner's point of view; and there's one partner, usually the wife, who's a pursuer, who wants to engage and settle things.

And so you pretty soon have a kind of runaway where the more he withdraws, the more abandoned and hurt and angry she feels. And the more she goes after him, the more impacted or frustrated or anxious, angry and unloved he feels and that pretty quickly has a life of its own.

Lee Rosen: Is it possible -- what do people try to do? The scenario and the way you describe it makes perfect sense to me. I mean, the idea of thinking of one person as being the pursuer and the other one being sort of conflict-avoidant; and the more he runs away, the more she chases.

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: But what do people try to do to get out of that pattern? How do they do -- when they come to you, obviously you have an approach that's based -- research and all that. But what are they doing? What ideas do we usually come up with left to our own devices to try and fix these problems?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, they try not to get into anything.

Lee Rosen: Just stop talking about it.

Stephen Hawthorne: They stop talking about it. And so often the pattern goes they'll go along for a while, there's a problem that hasn't been resolved, it inevitably pops up -- just any little thing. They will all say, "We argue about these stupid little things." And they know it's not about that thing; it's about really, bottom line, whether they feel loved or not. And they try to not get into arguments and so things don't get resolved.

And then when they do get into an argument, it doesn't get resolved and they kind of go along not talking. And then talking

about day to day -- like, a lot of couples say, "We take care of business pretty well. We run the household. But boy, if we get into something like money or kids or sex or -- it's just terrible."

Lee Rosen: Things blow up.

Stephen Hawthorne: So they stay out of it. Yeah, they blow up.

Lee Rosen: Right. So the bottom line is when we don't really know how to solve the problem what we typically do is stop addressing the issues. Now, so many professionals that we've had on this show talk about you've got to communicate.

Stephen Hawthorne: Sure.

Lee Rosen: You know, that's the big theme. But what you're saying is fundamentally if we run into trouble our instinctive response is stop communicating.

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, you can't not communicate. A rolling of eyes is communicating. Distancing is communicating. It's all communication. So if he walks out of the room, he may be walking out of the room in order not to lose his temper, but 90-some-odd percent of wives don't see it that way or they see it as he doesn't care.

Lee Rosen: Right. Great. So we're doomed. We're doomed.

Let me ask you this. Now, you said guys like connecting by working and women like to connect by talking. So a lot of folks that listen to this show, some of them are in trouble. I mean, they're tuning in here because the -- big problems. Now, other folks are using this show sort of a way to learn things, to treat this all sort of prophylactically. They want to try and do the best they can to make the marriage work.

Stephen Hawthorne: Preventative medicine is the best medicine.

Lee Rosen: Preventative medicine. Yeah. So, okay. You're a guy and you know -- because he's listened to this show and he's listened to you and so he knows, well, women like to communicate by -- connect by talking. Okay. So what does that mean in real life? What the heck are we supposed to talk about?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, I don't want to make general statements about men and women because I'll get in trouble one way or the other. But in my office --

Lee Rosen: That's what we're all about is getting you in trouble.

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah. Well, I've been there before. Women tend to connect -- see, we all need to connect and it's probably part of our DNA because human beings know alone I'm vulnerable. People are afraid in their own backyard in the dark for no good reason except we're often afraid of being alone in the dark.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Hawthorne: And so we need connection. But it's when that connection feels threatened that we get defensive. And so women tend to connect by talking. And they're raised to do that. They've got a different neurology. They're better with language, particularly around emotions, than we are because we get trained out of feeling an awful lot of stuff. At 4 I wasn't supposed to cry and at 4 1/2 I wasn't supposed to need my Mama.

So basically as men we get trained out of showing we're scared, showing we're sad, showing we're helpless, when women don't get trained out of all of that. Some women do, but mostly they don't. And they get a lot of support. And they have a better brain architecture than we do for talking and that's why we don't do so well in arguments with them. Also, the fact that we're not supposed to talk about tender feelings and we're not to feel them. So that basically leaves us with anger, which is not really cool at home --

Lee Rosen: Hard to communicate.

Stephen Hawthorne: It's good if you have to pick up a stick and whack the problem but in the living room and the bedroom it's not the coolest way to respond. But that's how we're wired and that's how we're trained.

Lee Rosen: Well, I want to shift gears on you now and ask you -- we're talking about couples arguing and the kinds of things that they're arguing about. The world has changed a lot in the last year. The economy has changed. People are losing their jobs. People are feeling financial stress like they never really have before. Have the arguments changed? Does this economic change impact the way people argue or what they're arguing about or what's going on in houses?

Stephen Hawthorne: No. It's just increased the tension. So people are more stressed and so they're arguing more because they're feeling less safe generally and that translates into -- money's a huge issue. There are

basically only eight areas you have to deal with. It's money; and sex; and religion; and children, how to raise them; and extended family and where you go for Thanksgiving and so forth; and friends and leisure; who takes out the garbage, household chores. I don't know if that's all eight. But there are basically eight areas that you have to figure out and --

Lee Rosen: You just listed all the things we argue about.

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah. Well, that's all there is.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's it.

Stephen Hawthorne: But it's -- basically what drives the arguments is whether people are feeling safe with each other and connected with each other. And so since the whole economy has been -- made most of us feel very unsafe, it just cranks it up.

I was surprised because I thought, well, with the economy like it is -- therapy is a choice; it's not a necessity. You've got mortgage, food, so forth and so on. But my practice didn't drop off. It grew. And I realized talking with other clinicians that people are much more stressed and it really, really affects people's marriages.

Lee Rosen: Right. A lot of fallout.

Stephen Hawthorne: A lot of fallout.

Lee Rosen: Interesting. Although, then you get folks that are -- their marriages are a disaster but they can't afford to do anything about it other than see a counselor. So I guess they're motivated to make it work.

Stephen Hawthorne: They are. But you know, a lot of people have stayed together for financial reasons. Just because folks are together doesn't mean they're incredibly happy. Divorce is hugely destructive to women, particularly women with kids. I'm sure you know they're likely to go below the poverty line. It's just a -- it's a terrible business. People do -- and people are very committed. I mean, they take their marriage vows seriously and they will work at it, but they get very frustrated because the pattern has a life of its own and it just goes on and on and on and on.

The thing that I like is that, one, it's covered by insurance. But basically, for couples I'm a coach. And a lot of men don't like to come in to see a therapist because it's a sign of failure. And it's kind of -- I understand that. It's sort of like I'm ashamed to go tell this stranger that I am not succeeding in my marriage, right?

But I look at it more as -- Tiger Woods is an incredible golfer. He has coaches. And basically the kind of therapy I do is coaching covered by insurance, in a sense. I'm real practical. I give experiments to do at home. I'm very active. And it's basically 10 to 12 sessions people who are really committed can make a big difference and can change that pattern and replace it with a much more beneficial one where they feel connected and heard and understood.

Lee Rosen: You know, you have these couples that you've described who are having these arguments, they're repeating them over and over again, it's not going anywhere, and so they stop communicating because they're just avoiding the difficult subject.

Stephen Hawthorne: Right.

Lee Rosen: What is the biggest danger of not getting back on track? What happens to people?

Stephen Hawthorne: They end up coming to see you.

Lee Rosen: They end up with a divorce. That really is -- so they can't just kind of package it all up and coexist without communicating. Eventually they're going to melt down.

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, the divorce rate for first marriages is somewhere around 50 percent, although it's dropping slightly. But there are plenty of first marriages that stay together that are not happy; they just survive. And they survive for the kids or they survive because they have to financially; there's no other option. So people endure. We're a tough bunch on the one hand.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. So when they finally -- my thinking is, if you find yourself stuck in this pattern and you are communicating less and less, at some point you realize what you were trying to do isn't working. You've got to change. You've got to mix it up. And I don't know that at that point, for most of us, there's a whole lot we can do on our own. We do start to feel like we've kind of done whatever we could dream up.

So they call you. They want to come and see you or some other expert like you. What is the first step? What is the -- how do you begin to dig yourself out of this situation you've got yourself in?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, I do a 75-minute first session because what I want to do is hear from each partner what they're experience is. Lots of times

people come in and I'm supposed to be judge and jury and I'm supposed to fix their partner. So we talk some about, now, I'm not judge and jury and I can't fix your partner. I mean, you can't fix your partner; what good am I going to be?

And then by the end of the first session -- so I listen to them. I listen to them a lot. And people basically are troubled and so by the end of the first session we have -- or the second -- we have a map of the pattern up on the board, what they're doing, what they're telling themselves about what their partner's doing, how they're feeling about that, and what they're doing and what they're partner's telling themselves that means, and so on.

Lee Rosen: So you're literally fleshing out in a graphical way up on the wall --

Stephen Hawthorne: Right.

Lee Rosen: -- this cycle that we're talking about. So you start to see how you're repeating it every time. Oh, that's fantastic.

Stephen Hawthorne: That's right. And they give me that information and I write it up on the board. And so husbands really love it because it's a schematic.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Hawthorne: It's like, oh, yeah, that's us. We can do something about that. So it's not all touchy-feely. I mean, there's a lot about feelings because feelings are what drive this. But basically, here is what it is, folks. And I ship them a JPG if they're willing to have their personal information go out on the Internet, which is pretty okay by and large. Or I print it for them.

And then we work on changing those six points on the cycle: what they're doing, what they're telling themselves about what they're partner's doing, and what they're feeling. And if you intervene on all three of those -- because we're all constantly storying. We're always telling ourselves what things mean. We have to. We have no choice. We have to figure out what's going on. Basically, we figure what's going to go on based on what has gone on.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Hawthorne: So if she tells herself he's walked out of the room; he doesn't care. And she realizes, no, I walk out of the room because I'm afraid I'm going to get furious and say something that's going to make it worse, well, that's a different interpretation. Because we're always

interpreting. And we always interpret the most -- sort of the negative one.

Lee Rosen: The worst way. Right. We make everything as bad as it can be.

Stephen Hawthorne: Because we're wired to avoid danger. And so we will go -- the default will be -- because when somebody is scared, they're tense and when somebody's angry they're tense. But if you say, "Oh, he's probably scared," and actually he's angry, you've got a shot in the head. Or if you look across the room at a party and somebody catches your eye and looks away you're going to think, "Oh, well, they think they're something. They don't like me." Chances are they're shy.

Lee Rosen: So you're taking this graphic, this image of the pattern, and you're teaching people how to stop it.

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: I mean, you're basically saying, boom, boom, boom, we can jump in in these places and get you back on track.

Stephen Hawthorne: And the first thing is de-escalating it. Just stop the pattern. Stop the angry explosion. And couples who are committed can do that in one or two sessions.

Now, it happens -- I mean, I'll say to people, the pattern is instinctive. It's faster than thought. It's about 400 nanoseconds where adrenaline and cortisol and all of those various neuropeptides go blam and you're wired and you're juiced for -- and so don't be concerned if it breaks up between here and the car when you leave. It will. So you don't be discouraged by that.

But if you keep -- you call a time out and you call a time out where you're going to reconnect, the first thing you've got to do is bring it down to the level of diplomacy where you can actually talk. And then -- that's frustrating in the first couple of sessions because nothing is getting talked about. We're just sort of more of the same. But what's happening is people are getting down to where they actually can talk.

Lee Rosen: Right. You've got to stop that cycle before you can even begin to start talking about making progress.

Stephen Hawthorne: A heart rate above 140 we're not very rational.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. That makes sense. And so then, sort of next phase, you move into, okay, now what we do when things aren't going the way they should?

Stephen Hawthorne: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: We don't want to get into that cycle but we need a better plan?

Stephen Hawthorne: And what Sue Johnson, who is one of the creators of emotionally-focused therapy, calls it is unpacking. They come in, they've had an argument, and I have each of them talk to me about their experience. And everybody's experience is different. I mean, I tell folks, if you had the same experience you wouldn't be here and I would have to get an honest job.

And as people feel understood by me and then by their partner, they are willing to drop down into being more vulnerable. And so somebody may start out angry, and anger is a perfectly reasonable emotion. It's to deal with feeling violated and telling people to get off your front porch or whatever. It also feels much better to many people, particularly us guys, than sadness, scare and helplessness and so on; all those things we're not supposed to feel, or much less express.

But people begin to soften and they begin to be -- and I'm listening for those feelings and I want to help them be in touch with them and then I want to help them share them with their partner because basically the complaint that women have is he doesn't talk. He doesn't have any feelings or he doesn't tell me about them. And the fact is, men have feelings; we just learn that some of them are acceptable and some of them aren't. And we learn not to feel because you've got to put on your armor and go to work everyday, or you've got to be the one that goes out and shoots whatever the problem is. Feelings can get in the way.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you learn a different system of dealing with things than your wife has. Now, you have a blog where you talk about something called ABC Therapy. And we haven't talked about that expressly. Is that what we're talking about?

Stephen Hawthorne: That's what we're talking about. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Why is it called ABC Therapy?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, because I teach in a medical center and we have this jargon. So it was Affect Behavior and Cognition, which is psychologese for feelings and actions and thoughts. So when I was thinking of what

I was going to call it, I thought, FAT is probably going to be confusing.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Hawthorne: So basically it's ABC and it's also sort of "simple as." You know, it's pretty clear. I'm really fortunate to have worked with wonderful people in the family studies program at Duke and we've been talking about this stuff for years. And so a couple years ago I thought, I'm just going to put this together. I'm going to take some things from emotionally-focused therapy and some things from cognitive behavioral therapy -- because there's this discussion about which is the best. Actually, both together are pretty much what we're doing all the time. We're thinking and we're feeling and we're acting.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so your blog is at ABCTherapy.wordpress.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes for this show.

Stephen Hawthorne: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: But ABCTherapy.wordpress.com. Do you have a lot of -- is that the kind of information that would be helpful to somebody working on their marriage or is that more for the professionals out there?

Stephen Hawthorne: Both. It's an explanation in pretty straightforward English about how the process works and what it is I do.

Lee Rosen: Well, we're short on time. Stephen, I really appreciate you joining us. We've covered a lot of ground today. Is there anything else that we need to make sure folks are aware of?

Stephen Hawthorne: Well, in terms of other professionals, I am in solo practice and so I can only do this very -- or offer this very useful process to a limited number of people. So I am looking for young therapists who want to learn a very effective couples model to grow my practice so that -- well, I guess you started out probably as an individual and --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Hawthorne: -- you're offering extraordinary services to people around the state now.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I appreciate you joining us, Stephen. Really terrific. And I love that way that you have presented all of this in a -- it's just very understandable. So let me mention to you guys that are

thinking about this, check out ABCTherapy.wordpress.com. Definitely worth a look.

And Stephen's website is at StephenHawthorneLCSW.com. And there are resources there for couples, things like information about Stephen's practice, information about therapy, that sort of thing. I'll put a link to that site in the show notes as well.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime -- and I've been getting a lot of this back from you and I appreciate it -- any comments, any feedback, tell us how we're doing, suggest ideas for upcoming shows, tell us what we're not doing well, whatever you've got. I love to hear it. A couple of ways to get up with us. You can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. You can also call us at (919) 256-3083. That is our listener comment line and I would love to hear your input, so please keep doing that.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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