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How Fair is Your Marriage?

This is episode #93 of Stay Happily Married, "How Fair is Your Marriage?"

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here by telephone with Dr. B. Janet Hibbs. Dr. Hibbs has taught at -- gosh, I could go through the list, but quite a few prestigious universities. And she's been publishing papers on psychological issues since way back in '78. She's been in private practice in Philadelphia since 1987 and she's been married for more than 20 years.

But today we're going to focus on something really important. We're going to be talking about how critical fairness is to a relationship. She's got a new book out, *Try to See it My Way: Being Fair in Love and Marriage*. It was published earlier this year and it will be coming out in paperback in March.

Welcome to the show, Dr. Hibbs.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Thanks so much, Lee. It's my pleasure to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really glad you could join us. I think this whole topic of fairness is a tough one. It's not an easy thing to work through in a marriage. And I think what's fair might seem obvious to each person individually, but I'm hoping you will fill us in on what the truth is behind fairness and why maybe it's not as obvious as it seems.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right. I'm eager to do that and I think it is a little bit of a curious issue for people because each person thinks they know what's fair until they run into their spouse's definition, which is often very different from theirs.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. Fairness is in the eye of the beholder, I guess. What caused you to really get interested in this and to dig into it?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Well, I had started off my professional life in clinical psychology, which focuses much more on individual issues and kind of how individuals think and relate and behave. And after a couple of years I decided that I was really much more interested, and I took graduate training, in couples and family therapy, which at that time back in the late '70s was this new burgeoning field which almost no one had heard of.

And the person -- my mentor and teacher about what's called relational ethics, which is what you owe and deserve in relationships, really led me in my own life as well as in my clinical practice to become deeply interested in the issues of what we think of as what's fair. What do I owe to you? What do I deserve from you? And when you think about it, we each have a very strong, I would say almost intuitive grasp, of when things are fair and when they aren't fair; it's just that our intuition isn't always correct.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, in the book you talk about sort of the two key aspects of fairness. And so one of them is this idea of intuition or instinct, right?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Elaborate on that. But what's the other one?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Okay. So there are two. The first one is what we think of as just an innate basis of fairness. If you think about even ancient law, it's all based on [recording error] justice. It's really been something that human beings have -- it's part of -- I would say kind of an ancient part of wisdom and it's something we orient ourselves toward and which really makes governments run, it's how people get along in groups.

So there is both a systemized view that began with our gut feeling about right and wrong and don't harm another. But clearly if that's all fairness were made up of, there would never be divorce and people wouldn't hurt each other. Even people who love each other wouldn't hurt each other.

So the second and the, I would say, more complicated notion about fairness is learned. And I encourage people to think about this as if you were learning it in your family growing up as your first language is learned; which is, it's learned through thousands of interactions between family members in which no one prefaces every interaction with "this is fair/this isn't fair." You just learn the system of give and take, of what's expected, what you're expected to do, what you get in kind of return for what you invest, in essence how you try, whether your parents and then extended family relate to you in that kind of unspoken system of give and take.

And so we learn this in our families growing up and we don't particularly challenge it because it's our family's. And it's often when we meet up with the other tribe of our spouse's family, or sometimes out in the world, that we come to understand, ah, that was only one way of understanding fairness. There are as many ways of understanding fairness as there are families.

Lee Rosen: Well, theoretically we come to that realization.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right.

Lee Rosen: I guess it doesn't always happen.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: No, it doesn't always happen.

Lee Rosen: You know, so to reveal my bias, I guess, I have in my head an idea that fair means equal.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Okay.

Lee Rosen: So if you cook, I set the table and do the dishes and we look at sort of how much time and effort that requires and we're even.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: So are you suggesting that maybe I'm wrong, that fairness does not equal equality?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: I'm suggesting a couple things. First, you're right in the sense that we each have a very strong tracking system for reciprocity. And neuroscientists have actually located what they call -- loosely call -- the "fairness organ" in the brain. It's in the right prefrontal cortex.

And when you think about how we survived in caves and in small groups for thousands of years, we survived in much the same way primates do, by having a very strong sense of reciprocity. And the

group member who didn't share or who didn't, let's say, take an equal part was really punished by kind of the avenging angels of the group. And you'll still see that in primate behavior.

So there is definitely a tracking system where people know, okay, you cooked; I'll clean up. Or, hey, you worked a long day; I'll do something to help you now. So that's the -- I would say kind of one aspect of fairness. But not everything can be quid pro quo. And even if you do something for me that you think is meaningful to you, it may not be meaningful to me. And so that's where fairness has this subjective quality because --

And it's also based in long-term relationships on the base of trust. So for example, let's say my husband becomes sick, catches a flu, and I'm giving him care for a week. Well, he's not doing something back for me quid pro quo that week, right? But I trust, hey, if I need something down the line, he will be there for me.

So in longstanding relationships that are healthy, there's a generous spirit of give and take where you trust that when I need a turn, I'll get a turn; and if you need one, I'll give you one.

That breaks down for people because they either run into the differences in terms of, again, what's meaningful to them growing up in their families really may not be meaningful at all to their spouse, and that's a difficult concept. When you're married to somebody you think, what's meaningful to me should be meaningful to you. But it often isn't.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. You're introducing some ideas that I don't think many of us are very -- we're not very conscious of.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right.

Lee Rosen: We don't realize we're doing what you're suggesting we're doing. But as I sit here and listen to you it's like, wow, I really do do that. And it also is incredibly exhausting in a way to have that mechanism running all the time where you are sort of keeping score.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Well, I think we actually only have the keeping score component when things start going wrong. So I mean, it is automatic. It's as you said, when there's kind of a generosity of spirit it's not effortful. It's like, "Oh, honey, you did this; let me do that for you." It feels good. It feels generous. It feels what we want to do.

But when we feel injured or when we feel wronged or when we feel that the other person doesn't get us in some way, then the tracking system begins in earnest. And that's when people call -- when they have arguments and you throw in everything but the kitchen sink, well, that's because that tracking system has a memory and you're able to say, "Remember the time that I did this and you didn't do that for me?" It takes on a historical meaning.

And so the tracking system isn't effortful when things are going well. It becomes effortful and it becomes -- I would say there's an avenging aspect, the feeling of injustice. And people really get stuck in feeling unjustly treated and they often then become -- have an adversarial position, vis-à-vis a family member or spouse.

Lee Rosen: Now, we all know that when things do get off track and somebody does throw that list of things, that is always the woman, isn't it?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Women do have better memories, I think. I think they are definitely the ones who -- "You did blah, blah, blah, blah on this date and you said this. Don't you remember that?" No. Women actually do have very good memories for relational detail, especially when they feel injured. And guys often are just like, "Whatever. Can we just get over this argument?"

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: So that is why I think women have -- the tag "nag" is often put to a woman. Men aren't known as nags; they can be known as jerks sometimes, but not as nags. Because women do have that really fine-tuned, "And here was the context in which this happened." So yeah. I mean, it is different gender-wise in terms of what men track and what women track.

Lee Rosen: You know, I think most of us come to the marriage with the idea that if you love me, you will -- I can count on you meeting my needs and treating me fairly --

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right. Yes.

Lee Rosen: -- and that I can just sort of trust that's going to happen. I think in the book you sort of suggest that maybe isn't such a good assumption.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: It is a longing. And I think if one can recognize that it is a longing rather than an accurate take on what love means, then you're okay. And then you have to say, where did I come up with this longing? It is a belief -- that belief, "if you love me, you should know what I

need without my having to ask" -- it's a belief that's rooted in the parent-child relationship where each of us spends many years expecting our parents to know what we need and to meet our needs without our being able to articulate our needs. Because let's face it, for the first few years we're pretty nonverbal. But parents figure out very basic things about us and to us that feels like being loved.

Then we transfer that expectation onto our love relationship in our grownup life, that if we're loved enough, the other person will meet our needs without our having to ask. And sometimes we don't even know ourselves. We have not thoughtfully identified what it is we need; we just know when we feel hurt or misunderstood.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, and I do feel like a lot of marriage experts give us the advice to tell our spouses what it is that we need and to be willing to communicate these ideas. But it is tricky, I think, maybe to make yourself vulnerable. If you need something, that maybe it's not -- you do want them to just sort of know.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: That's true. I think that the fear of vulnerability is very strong, especially if you have felt injured. And so it's a little bit like emotional gymnastics to say, "Well, you feel injured but go ahead and try again to get your needs met." And often times people will say, "Well, I've already asked." Or, "I won't get --" they focus on the outcome, "I won't get what I deserve back." Or, "My wife/husband will say or do, get over it, or what's your problem, or they'll be dismissive."

And I think, okay, well, then you have to prepare for that. Like, if you actually could anticipate that, then how do you want to hang in there in a way that you feel good about, that's constructive, and that continues to focus on, "I'm going request a fair hearing"? And I think what most people forget is that first they have to give one. So it's how you ask to get your needs met that often times really determines if you will.

So I suggest -- kind of the golden rule of my marriage is, if I feel that my husband has missed the boat in some way, I'll first begin by trying to credit him. Kind of roses and thorns. "Hi, honey. I know you were tired. I know you probably didn't realize," whatever, "but I need to ask if you'll do this. That would help me."

And usually, if you put something in a way that basically says "no harm, no foul," like, I'm not going to take your head off, you made a mistake, or maybe you didn't even know you made a mistake but this was hard for me or this is what I need to have different, then

you have a better chance of getting it, rather than putting the other person on the defensive.

Lee Rosen: Right. It makes a lot of sense. I want to ask you about this whole idea of economic infidelity.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Okay.

Lee Rosen: But before I do that, so many of us have kids.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right.

Lee Rosen: And you've talked a lot about that we're learning about fairness as children. And so I'm thinking about it as I've got a 16-year-old and an almost 13-year-old and I do hear a lot about fairness verbalized from them. But I'm wondering, what does it look like in a family when you're educating kids about fairness? What are we talking about?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Okay. Well, one of the I guess impressions that I tried to correct in my book was people often think, oh, it's divorce that's so bad for kids. And I think, well, that depends how it's handled, for sure. And I'm in the business of trying to help people handle their relationships better, whether they're married or whether they're divorced or separated.

But one of the things that I think parents don't quite understand is that it's not the model of how did I relate to my partner, although that's clearly important; it's how did I relate to my kid that teaches kids the basics of give and take.

And so part of it is parents I think need to kind of observe, okay, what are the primary needs of kids? If I were to put it briefly I would say, well, they need to have their primary relationships protected so that even if you split up, that you make sure that your child has an ongoing relationship with the people who love your child, even if you don't love them anymore.

Children need an emotionally safe environment. Children need to be able to negotiate some choices as they get older because people, even children, feel better about the decisions they've made if they have a voice in them. So you don't need a parent to be a kind of fairness dictator to say, "It's my way or the highway." You need a child to have some reasonable choices within that set of expectations.

We also need parents to have reasonable expectations, which parents may or may not have evaluated how reasonable are their expectations? What expectations are growth-promoting? What expectations actually might be a problem for a child?

Lee Rosen: Right. So if their expectations are out of hand, is that the kid that grows up to be the spouse that feels entitled to something in the marriage that maybe is not justifiable?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: That is certainly one route to it. So if you have what I would call like a fairness dictator as a parent, kind of "my way or the highway" kind of parenting, and you don't have another parent offsetting that or saying, "Hey, wait, that wasn't okay," then that child -- so if that child has no advocate, they will become what you -- they'll either do one of two things.

They'll either react -- they'll act out and become what you think of as that kind of super-entitled, like the world owes me; or they may, if they are a good enough match for the expectations, they may turn themselves inside out in pretzel-like fashion to try to meet a parent's unreasonable expectations. And then they become kind of like the world's biggest doormat in terms of having learned to comply so well with things that aren't reasonable. So it can go one of two ways, really.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it does make you think about things -- for me, anyway - - it brings a new dynamic into the situation of raising kids.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: It does. It really does.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And sort of fast-forward to what's going to happen in their lives down the road.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Yep.

Lee Rosen: Very tough. So what about this economic infidelity concept that you bring up? I'm guessing that sort of ties into the idea of somebody feeling entitled. What is that all about?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Well, there's lots of I would say primary arguments that people can have in a marriage. Money is one of them. And actually, money has one of the leading factors as people head toward divorce.

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: So I call them the money, kids, chores, and sex arguments; and then there are loyalty conflicts.

So going back to financial issues, the financial -- I would call it -- infidelity are betrayals that one spouse makes around money. So money's the content. And either it's because of a values clash over money or it can be -- I've seen situations where one spouse, let's say, is running a family business and feels like, "Hey, the only way the business is going to survive is basically if I bankrupt my own account," and may not even let the spouse know because they think, "Oh, I'll be able to pay it back," or, "When times are a little better I'll pay it back." And so that is committing financial infidelity. It's a secret that's around money that the other person will suffer consequences from without getting a vote in whether this is a good way to proceed.

So people who commit financial infidelity, sometimes they're the nicest people in the world and they have a huge blind spot about what they owe their spouse because they're doing it on behalf of their own family of origin. And sometimes financial infidelity is really more about someone who does have "the world owes me, you owe me, I don't care what you think, I don't care what you think is fair" -- it's a power-based formula.

Again, people make mistakes and people are unfair. Sometimes really good people are unfair -- have a big blind spot about it -- which often does come from their family of origin experience. And then other people, the ones who tend to be more destructive, really have a -- it's really more of a power-based abusive kind of relating that's saying "you owe me."

Lee Rosen: Right. I think some people -- and obviously the issues you're describing are pretty deep and really go to the core of the relationship. But I think some people try to shortcut those sorts of issues by separating their finances and just operating as two independent economic entities --

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Right.

Lee Rosen: -- which almost sounds like it might disguise the issues that you're really talking about. Are you a proponent or an opponent of the idea of sort of doing all your money separately?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: I think doing all your money separately is a mistake and it shows a lack of trust between people. I certainly know that for the last, I don't know, 30 years or so women have been advised have your own credit card, have your own checking account, that's fine if it's not a secret. So I have a business account, my husband knows what's in it. We have joint accounts for other things.

The problem comes when it's a secret. It's not so much that having your own account is a problem, but having it be a secret or having it be inaccessible to the other person is a problem. And so many separate accounts are set up with the notion of "this is none of your business," and that's the problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes a lot of sense. Absolutely.

Well, listen, I'm really impressed by the book and I'm excited that it's coming out in paperback early next year. I'm going to put a link to it in the show notes for this episode. But let me ask you about the websites.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Okay.

Lee Rosen: I know you have a couple of them, DrBHibbs.com, that is the website for your practice. And I'll put a link to that.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: That's for my professional practice, right.

Lee Rosen: Now, what about -- and I love the name of this site -- TryToSeeltMyWay.com. What will we find there?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: You will find links to radio interviews, including podcasts; like, the one we're doing today I'll put on the website. You'll find TV appearances. You'll find my upcoming workshops. You'll find fairness tips for women, fairness tips for men. You'll find a fairness questionnaire where people can do their own private questionnaire to try to figure out how fair am I.

Lee Rosen: Oh, now, that's interesting. You give it a little rating?

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: And excerpts of the book as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Terrific. Well, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to talk with us.

Dr. B. Janet Hibbs: Absolutely, Lee. It was my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Lee Rosen: And thank you all for joining us. We'll be back again next week.

And I will of course put links to the book and to the TryToSeeltMyWay.com and to DrBHibbs.com all in the show notes so that you can find those quickly and easily.

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And I just can't thank you enough for your comments and your feedback each week. I really appreciate your help with coming up with new ideas for upcoming shows and all of your positive and negative feedback. We love to hear what you've got to say so that we can keep making the show better and better for you.

If you have some feedback you can reach our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can drop us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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