

Stephanie: This is Episode number 169 for Stay Happily Married: Fight Less, Love More.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage. Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your constant bickering ruining your relationship? We've all been in a relationship where fights just never seem to end. We bicker about the little things, the big things, and the things that would matter to no one but us. What does all this constant fighting do to our relationship?

Luckily, we have acclaimed author, Laurie Puhn, as our guest today to discuss these issues. Laurie has a bachelor's and law degree from Harvard University. Formerly a corporate attorney, she is now recognized as an expert in the field of couples mediation and conflict resolution. Laurie has a private practice in couples mediation in Manhattan. Her empowering, fast and simple mediation approach for keeping relationships strong and healthy is what sets her apart from other relationship experts.

She is the author of the national bestseller, "Fight Less, Love More: 5-Minute Conversations to Change Your Relationship without Blowing Up or Giving In", as well as "Instant Persuasion: How to Change Your Words to Change Your Life".

When Laurie isn't busy writing books, she is often featured as an expert guest on shows, such as Good Morning America, The Early Show, FOX News Channel, Weekend Today, 20/20 and CNN. Her relationship communication advice has been featured in Good Housekeeping, Real Simple, Redbook, Newsday and even The New York Times. Lastly, Laurie is also a syndicated columnist and Huffington Post blogger.

Welcome to the show, Laurie. I'm so glad you could join us. What empowered you to write a book that dealt exclusively with fights?

Laurie: What I see in my couples mediation practice is that people are finding that the center of all their problems is coming out in fighting. You feel neglected and you want more attention, and you wind up fighting about it.

Random things in which you feel unappreciated and disrespected, or you feel like you've been stepped on or you've been a doormat, and then you start to go to an extreme on the other side. And what I find in my couples mediation practice is that people are fighting more than ever now, especially now in these economic times. It really is the culprit of causing so many marriages to . . . you just can't take it anymore.

And I wanted to write a book that said it didn't have to be that way. There's hope. You can fight less and love more, if we become wise with our words. And it is very simple. It's really a simple cure for fighting. We just step up to the plate and decide to learn a few new things. We can have a relationship that can turn around overnight.

Stephanie: We all have these big arguments and these little arguments, and like you said, everyone argues no matter who they are. Are there any arguments that you found in your experience that aren't worth having, and why?

Laurie: Absolutely. The saying 'pick your battles' is out there, but if I really ask a couple, and they'll look at me, they'll know the common sense, "Oh, I know I should pick my battles." And I say okay, what strategy do you use to pick them? "I don't know." Most of us don't really know. And that's what I do with "Fight Less, Love More". I try to bring logic to the emotional situation.

Here's the wise question to ask yourself. It's very powerful. Whenever you're trying to decide whether to have an argument, you ask yourself, "Does this affect me?" So if the answer is no, meaning you're pissed off that your husband did something to his friend, guess what, it doesn't affect you. Let it go.

Being married doesn't give us the right to judge and criticize everything our mate does. So if it affects you, sure, speak your mind. But if it doesn't, take a breath and say to yourself, "It does not affect me. It does not affect me. It does not affect me." And have a seat.

The other strategy for picking your battles is to know when you're having a dumb argument. And I say 'dumb' because smart people, Stephanie, including myself and probably you, too, have found ourselves in the midst of an argument. Afterward we go, "Well, that was all about nothing."

Stephanie: Exactly.

Laurie: Why do we just waste our energy, get in a bad mood, ruin our dinner or our car ride home over nothing? Again, as I do in "Fight Less, Love More", the idea is to bring some logic there. My background is in law, so I'm all about taking that legal perspective.

There are five types of dumb arguments that smart people have. One of the types is called the factual argument, when we argue about the name of a restaurant or a statistic, or anything that's a fact. One of us just needs to raise our hand, "Hey, honey, let's go check it on the Internet. Let's call our friends who were at the dinner with us. Let's not fight about this." It's common sense, right?

Another one is the premature argument. That's when you want to fight about which house you should move to when your child is five and they're going to enter kindergarten. Meanwhile, you're child is only one and you're living in an apartment. Do you want to get into a fight over ranch versus colonial house?

I'm not kidding. That's an easy-to-understand example, but people fight about things that are in the future. They feel really entitled to this argument. They want to have it. And I say, "Well, by the time the decision becomes imminent, won't some of the facts and circumstances and preferences change? Won't your financial situation possibly be different?" Maybe where your

friends or other family lives will be different? Yes, it might. It might. So you're just having an unnecessary argument.

So that's the point. When we use our logic to fight, it's not that we don't fight, it's that we pick the right fights. We say, "You know what? If I'm going to have that fight over where to live, let me save it for three years. Let me not have it five times over the next three years." You can talk about something, but don't fight toward the decision. Let it go.

So that's two. Rather than continue on with all of this detail, I actually have an excerpt of my book as well that you can get to through my website at fightlesslovemore.com. You can read more about all these fights.

Stephanie: Perfect. We know everyone fights differently. Some people are loud and they scream and they're very aggressive. Then you have others that seem to have a very cool exterior and they kind of shut down. What would be the best way to ensure a good fight?

Laurie: The first thing you have to realize, and this is extremely important, is that every couple has a fighting routine. If I ask you what happens when you get into a heated battle? Does somebody slam a door? Does someone go silent?

There are three key points to learning the good fight strategy, and here's the three key points. The first is you sit down. Sitting down seems so easy, right? But it's hard when your blood is boiling, but you do it to get out of your routine. The second thing you do is you play detective. Ask questions. "Why do you think that? What's making you so angry? What am I missing here? I'm not understanding this. Can you explain it?" By asking questions, you're showing your mate respect. If you can show respect in the middle of a fight, all the tension dies down.

Then there's the third step, which is about coming to a solution. What's that? Well, most of the time in fighting, we fight about the past and we want to argue our points about what happened yesterday, and make him or her agree with us. And a good fight is saying, "I don't care about yesterday. Let's talk about how we can do something differently in the future, so we can prevent the problem from happening again." A good fight is future-focused.

Stephanie: The subtext of your book is called, "Fight Less, Love More: 5-Minute Conversations to Change Your Relationship without Blowing Up or Giving In". Now, is five minutes really all that it takes to resolve a fight?

Laurie: Five minutes is about changing your awareness and saying the right things at the right time. When you do that, it only takes five minutes. Most of us are used to an hour-long fight. I used to do some of these myself. Sometimes, a fight can last three days, because we're putting our foot in our mouth, because we're striking back in a way that's causing retaliation. And those last forever.

For instance, if you feel neglected in your marriage, that's a huge thing that couples feel and it leads to a lot of fighting. If you feel alone, you start to pick battles. The real issue is that you need to sit down with your mate, and the five minutes is, "Honey, I don't feel like I'm number

one in your life. Do you feel like you're number one in my life?" And then say, "Well, what would be doing for each other to make each other feel number one?" And you literally get to three specific things you'd like your mate to do, that would make you feel number one.

When we act with logic and we talk with logic, we get the results that we want, and it only takes minutes.

Stephanie: This solves the issue of hopefully cutting down on reciprocal fights because if you're learning how to communicate properly, you're avoiding going through these fights over and over again, those ones that just tend to pop up. Is there anything you can do when you're fighting with someone who doesn't seem to want to back down?

Laurie: Yes. You reflect what they're saying back at them. If you fight to win and get the "Yes, dear, you were right all along. I was terribly wrong. I made a mistake." If you're trying to get that from your mate, forget it. Have you ever heard anyone say that? "I was so wrong, you were right the whole time."

Stephanie: It doesn't come up very often, I guess, does it?

Laurie: No. And if it does, you know what? You're about to have the fight again tomorrow, because he was only pretending to say that.

So you're not going to get that. If instead of that, what you do is you have your goal during the fight, to raise your mate's awareness of what his behaviors did or her behaviors did and how it affected you. If they're, like, "Well, you would have done the same thing," or "Well, you did that to me two years ago," you say, "So are you saying that when I hurt you that way, which I am terribly sorry about, that you feel it entitles you to hurt me?" So what have you done? You've reflected back what they're saying without anger. The goal is to bring awareness, that they understand what they're doing. What they're doing is retaliating.

Stephanie: This goes on to what you were just saying for that example. A lot of times we get into fights because we're unhappy with the way our spouse treats us or the way they do something. How can we criticize that behavior and these actions without provoking resentment from them?

Laurie: What we want to do is go for the positive. This is a really important tip in "Fight Less, Love More". If anyone is listening now, walk away with one gem. You want to say what you do want, not what you don't want. What I mean is, if you come home and your mate is at the computer doing email and Internet, and you feel lonely and you're sitting in the living room by yourself, do you want to walk upstairs and yell, "Get off that darn computer. I'm going to throw it out the window. You care about that computer more than you care about me."

What result are you going to get? That's straight out criticism. You're going to get defensiveness and retaliation. You know this. So why do we do it? Because we don't know any better. Well, here's the better. Say what we do want. "Honey, I really enjoy talking to you. I miss your company. I'm hanging out in the living room now and I'm going to have a drink. Would you join

me?" When you say the positive side, the complimentary side of what you do want, a person rises to that level, to that expectation, and wants to meet it.

That's just about word choice, and we can all make that change today, to say what we do want and not what we don't want.

Stephanie: Is it your belief that couples, those people who are compatible and meant to be together, not those couples that we've seen and all know, and wonder how they got matched up, but the people who are meant to be together, can those couples make it through any fight? Is love unconditional?

Laurie: Love is not unconditional. I'm so glad you asked that, Stephanie. The only people we unconditionally love are our children. We don't look at our spouse and think, "I love you no matter what. You can do anything to me, and I'll just teach you how to respect. I'll teach you manners." No, no, no. We expect our spouse to come with those, to arrive with those. But what happens in any good marriage, even when the people are totally compatible, is that we get worn out. Over time, we start focusing on our work and our families and other things, and not our spouse, and we take it for granted.

I like to say what we come to expect of our mate, we come to neglect. Every time they do something we would have said thank you for when were dating, now we totally ignore. Over time, we stop being so nice to each other. We become kinder to strangers than we are to our spouse.

You might walk in the door and go straight to your computer instead of giving your spouse a hug. Even the most compatible can end up feeling ignored and unappreciated as the years wear on. What I find in my practice is that the biggest culprit of divorce is actually neglect. Cheating becomes a side effect of feeling neglected.

Stephanie: Is this what you mean in your book when you say that couples can cheat and not know it?

Laurie: Oh, no. That we can thank our technology for, Stephanie. What happens now is that you know if your mate has intercourse with someone, and meets this other special person in a bar, we know that's wrong. That used to make cheating a very simple thing. We all knew the line not to cross. But nowadays you can friend an ex on Facebook. You can do sexy text messages or sexting. You can watch online porn. You can be in a chat room with amateur porn, telling the person what to do. You can have voice connected to it. You can have images from your own camera going into this other person's home who is nude.

There are so many options. And what this means is that every person is going to have a different expectation of what counts as cheating. Two people, same marriage, if you've not had a conversation, it is likely one of you will accidentally cheat. It might be that you're both fine with friending an ex, but neither of you would be okay with having more email exchanges that are flirty. Great, you're on the same page, easy to set the line. But you have to have that five minute conversation. And if you haven't had it tonight, you're all at risk.

Go home, talk to your mate. Do it tomorrow if you have to. Just say five minutes, let's just talk about where the line is. What counts as cheating for us? If your mate thinks it counts as cheating to friend the ex and you don't, guess what, your mate wins because you don't want to do whatever counts as betrayal to your mate. You care about your mate.

Unless, of course, they're in an abusive situation, or the kind of dominating, controlling person that's emotionally abusive. Let me just add these kinds of caveats. I'm not saying you should agree to that. But I am saying that if you are in a relationship with a decent person, you've got to have the five minute talk and then respect the boundaries that he or she finds acceptable.

Stephanie: When it comes down to it, would you say that men and women want different things out of relationships?

Laurie: Not at all. This is a big eye-opener, a big one. People think men are thinking about sex and women are thinking about emotional intimacy. Actually, neither are really thinking full-time about either. All human beings, every single one of us, are all thinking about one thing: I want to be valued. And in that value is I want to be respected and I want to be appreciated. I want to be cared for and I want compassion. But the over-arching umbrella is I want to be valued. So the real breakdown in relationships comes from feeling that your partner doesn't care or value you.

"Fight Less, Love More" seeks to take each of these values. Respect - in what ways do we fight that can breed respect? Let's do that. If you feel unappreciated, "How can we just take five minutes a day and change that?" In just changing these small little bits of our words and actions, we can build that respect and that value.

What I found is that men and women both want this. They want the same thing. They're cheating for the same reasons, not feeling valued, and they're staying together for the same reason. Feeling connected to their mates. Feeling like she knows and values who I am. So men and women are really much more alike than we are different.

Stephanie: Laurie, thank you so much for taking the time and being with us on the show today. To find out more about Laurie Puhn, you can visit her website at www.fightlesslovesmore.com. We'll also have a link to this in the show notes. Or you can check out Laurie's book which is now available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Again, the title is "Fight Less, Love More: 5-Minute Conversations to Change Your Relationship without Blowing Up or Giving In".

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you. To comment on this or any other episode, call our Listener Comment Line at 919-256-3083, or email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, Stay Happily Married!

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