

Lee: This is Episode Number 184 of Stay Happily Married: The Science of Love.

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

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Is human nature to blame for your lackluster relationship? Sometimes we get so preoccupied with the hustle and bustle around us that we forget that we're only human. We, too, are animals at the base of it all. The innate instincts that we possess can do anything from saving our life to unfortunately ending our relationship.

Our guest today has insight into how things like our brain activity and physiological functions can impact our relationships. Chad Jordan of Systemic Health Resources in Raleigh, North Carolina has been working to help couples in a different way than most other psychological professionals. Chad works with the physiological and relational resources that emphasize the interconnected nature of the human condition.

Chad is a North Carolina native, having received his Bachelor's in Psychology from the University of North Carolina and his Master's in Marriage and Family Therapy from Appalachian State. Chad is an active husband and father. He's got two boys, and he even coaches their soccer team.

Welcome to the show, Chad. I am really glad that you could join us.

Chad: Thanks for having me, Lee.

Lee: This is an interesting topic, the science of love thing. I'm fascinated when the science is important and we don't have to get all bogged down in the emotions. Sometimes I feel like that gives me a break from a hard week of talking about my feelings.

Let me ask you, when we're talking about the human instincts and all of this physiological stuff, how exactly does that work? What's that doing to our emotions? What are we really talking about here?

Chad: It's an interplay of several things. Of course, we're talking about brain functioning, physiological functioning which may include increased heart rate, and then also the emotional processes that come about that are instincts developed way back, early on in life. It's very primitive. So it's an interaction of several different systems within the body, and through relationships, different emotional processes occur as well.

Lee: Okay, you're starting to make sense to me. This is complicated, but when I think of instincts I think about if I'm underwater and I can't breathe, I've got an instinct to get back to the surface, to fight my way up there so I can survive. Where are instincts coming from when we're talking about relationships? What is that rooted in?

Chad: It's rooted in attachment. An easier way to think about it is just to think about an infant. When they're born they typically come out screaming. They're not able to use language to communicate, but they can certainly let you know if they need something.

That is an instinct. They cry out and it's a desire for getting their basic needs met early on. That's an instinct based upon attachment, attaching to a caregiver. For infants, they are looking for milk, for sustenance, for comfort, for security, for support, and they're going to reach out to a caregiver immediately. Typically it's going to be through screaming to let you know they need something.

Lee: Is that whole attachment thing really what impacts our relationships 20, 30, 40 years later?

Chad: It certainly is. It's that early-on childhood attachment process, as well as other experiences in life, some of which could be traumatic and make it very difficult to trust another person. One may be more guarded in a relationship based upon what's happened.

There are several factors that go into how one may choose to interact with another person, and it's based upon this attachment theory which was developed a long time ago in studying infants and different experimental processes, and looking at how an infant will attach to an adult. We're finding that in adult relationships the same processes go on.

Lee: That is fascinating. Are you suggesting that most of what we do as adults in our marriages and our relationships is coming from a period before we even remember? Am I on the right track with this?

Chad: Yes, I think you're certainly on the right track. It's not necessarily something we could remember that can be a factor in how one chooses to connect or not. I think these are conditioned over time as well. There could be an early-on sense where a child did not find a good attachment figure and didn't feel safe or comfortable.

What we've also found through technology and the ability to do brain imaging and to study the internal processes is that our brains can rewire on more secure attachments later on in life. It doesn't necessarily mean that if

you did not have a secure attachment early on you will never be able to trust and feel comfortable and safe with another person. It's going to also be based on those experiences in between.

Lee: Let's fast forward 30, 40, even 50 years. We had a baby dealing with attachment and now we've got an adult in a marriage that's probably not going very well if they're sitting in your office. What is the typical situation that you see a couple facing where you think things like the brain activity and the physiological functions are actually playing a role in how the relationship is going?

Chad: One factor that I often see with couples coming in is they feel like they've grown apart. There's been a significant period of time where they haven't felt good about their relationship. One spouse may be complaining that, "I never see my partner. They're never here. I've asked them to come home and be available for me to talk about what's going on and they just do not seem to be interested." From that, oftentimes distance occurs, and therefore the attachment, which is an adult attachment, to the spouse is compromised and it's insecure.

I'd mentioned about a child screaming out for attention and for needs to be met. The same thing happens with adults. I often see a couple come in complaining of, "We just don't seem to talk anymore. I reach out and he's not there," and from that they start to feel more and more secluded or alone in this relationship. Often as a protective measure, if you're trying to reach out and get support and let each other know about your needs, if they're not getting met then sometimes you scream louder, just like a child.

You're trying to find that support, trying to find that connection. Sometimes that screaming with adults comes out as a criticism. "You're never here." "You just don't care." And it becomes more accusatory. From that, the spouse will then have to determine how they can react to that. "I'm obviously not doing what my wife needs for me to do, and I'm trying, but I just can't get it right." And oftentimes that's internalized as, "I'm a failure."

And to protect, sometimes the spouse will then pull back and withdraw, and will not be available. Therein lies the cycle, the negative interaction where one is screaming for that connection and the other doesn't know what to do with that. They feel like a failure so then they hide, they withdraw. It supports to other partner that, "I'm not here for you."

Lee: The cycle that you're describing is very familiar to me. I hear people describing what you're suggesting all the time and they get into this cycle you're talking about. But you're really saying that a whole lot of that,

especially the screaming for connection and for attention, is almost like your brain desperately needs this stuff because of you who are dating all the way back to your infancy. Am I on the right track with that?

Chad: You're definitely on the right track. One of those instincts that we're talking about here, as I've labeled it, is attachment. If you're not getting that then you're missing something. Pair bonding is something that's been around for a while, and that's what we're talking about with couple relationships. If anything is threatening that relationship, typically one is going to do what they can to try and take care of that issue. Sometimes it's in a productive way, and sometimes it's not so productive, and the 'not so productive' is when they tend to end up in my office.

Lee: Right, the 'not so productive', I hear you. So what is going on in our brains? Let's drill down in the science here a little bit. What makes our brains do this? Why are we reacting to one another in the way that we're doing this? Because I think most of us just think, "Oh, well. I feel this way because it's logical, and I've concluded this is the way I should respond." But you're saying there's something more going on there. What's really going on inside our brains?

Chad: What you described is that someone can actually think. They can slow down and think about what's going on emotionally, what's going on internally, what's going on in the relationship, and that tends to afford a higher level of interaction and thinking. What you're asking about is that wired response that we have. We often hear it labeled often times as "flight, fight, or freeze." If there's a threat to one's safety, security, attachment, then there tends to be that instinctual reaction to either fight or attack, flight or run away, or freeze or shut down, "I just can't say or do anything."

That's something that is a hard-wired process that is very primitive. It bypasses that, "Let me take a step back and think about this. Let me think about how I'm feeling so then I can process and interact and describe what's going on with me in a way that may be more likely to be received in a way that a dialogue opens up."

You're talking about that primitive process. The limbic system, the amygdala, these are parts of the brain that get activated or triggered when there is threat to one's safety/security, which includes the attachment process.

Lee: I have to say that I love your explanation, because now the stupid crap that comes out of my mouth so much of the time feels like it's not my fault, like it's physiological. My brain is taking over. I can't exercise good judgment because sometimes these processes are beyond me.

That makes me wonder. Do you see situations where things are headed in a bad direction, things are going wrong in the relationship, that these deeply wired responses sort of pile up? Do you ever get a domino effect out of the situation?

Chad: Yes, that happens often. The longer it goes on with that type of interaction – you have anger, rage, resentment, contempt - a lot of these very powerful negative emotions that can take over, it does domino, particularly if you're not able to de-escalate. If the couple is ineffective in their attempts to de-escalate then the negative cycle can and tends to increase and becomes more caustic and more reactive in negative way.

So yes, there's a domino effect that occurs. Then it becomes that much harder for spouses to really take that step back and get in touch with vulnerabilities, feeling disconnected and disappointed and hurt. Those are very vulnerable emotions that if you're in relationship includes a lot of anger, resentment and contempt, and you're going to be very unlikely to express your disappointment and your hurt, which is a softer expression of emotions which can tend to be one that promotes that connection.

It's a protective process and dominos do fall. That's what we tend to try and get through in the therapeutic process. Lee, you mentioned, "It helps me understand," Part of it is getting insight and awareness as to what's going on, and then be able to verbalize that and communicate it in a way that your partner can hear it, they can attune and connect and support, and de-escalate the negative interaction.

Lee: That's exactly where I want to go next, because what I'm hearing from you at some level is that this is millions of years of evolution of your brain causing your marriage to be in trouble." So now you go to an expert like you, Chad, who's going to help you. How in the world do you fight back against this wiring that we've got? How do you help us get out of this situation and get to the point where we can have a happy relationship?

Chad: That's the difficult part to this, right? You're asking a tough question. I'll do my best to answer that. It really does take a lot of time and patience with oneself, with each other, and with the process. We have to consider this a process. There's no quick fix. Just because you're able to label evolutionary processes and explain it away, that doesn't mean it's going to fix it.

The fixing occurs through de-escalating, as I've mentioned, and being able to correct the interactions so that then each spouse can describe what's going on underneath those surface emotions that tend to be anger, withdrawal, and distancing. It is a process, and in order to get through that

it takes time and patience and commitment to work on the attachment and pair bonding in the marriage, in the coupled relationship.

Lee: Do you feel like you can work on these issues with just one spouse, or do you need to have both partners and the couple with you with your approach to this?

Chad: From my experience, what I tend to do is have both present for the majority. There are times where I'd want to meet with a spouse individually, but I'm also going to meet with the other spouse individually, and that tends to be to gather more information about past experiences, early childhood relationships that were observed and experienced, and to really be able to support and validate and reflect that individual's internal process, and then coach them to a position of, "How can I describe with my spouse while we're together what's going on with me?"

Lee: I'm curious. So when people come and see you they leave far more educated about why they're doing what they're doing, and you're teaching them ways to break the cycle and break the pattern and to get on in a more positive direction. Does knowing the "whys" and understanding this whole brain connection make it easier for them to get back on track?

Chad: For most, it does. To have that awareness and to have an explanation, that's the start. We call it normalizing. You're not crazy; you're not doing crazy things. This is very real, normal, and natural, and in order to reflect and validate that, that normalizing process tends to promote the ability to get in touch with and to talk about what's going on individually.

To have that awareness, to have the education of what goes on emotionally, doesn't mean that the therapist is an expert on that one person's emotions. It is a way to talk about it and to really reflect that this is something that goes on for many people, and we often get caught in this cycle and we start fighting each other when we know that doesn't make any sense. Being able to explain that is very helpful for many folks.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense to me. I think that would be a very appealing model for certain types of people that need that explanation. It certainly appeals to me.

We've covered a big topic here today. What else do folks need to know about this area?

Chad: It's so rich. There is so much literature out there and many therapists are integrating the type of therapy that I use which is emotion-focused therapy based on attachment. It's talking a lot about what we've discussed today. There are many books and journal articles written on it.

I think the one thing to take away, and I always like to talk with couples about this, is, "Do you want to fight this cycle that you're caught up in or do you want to fight each other?" And really, to be able to externalize, to pull it out of blaming each other for everything that's going on and to look at how naturally you get caught up in this process, this cycle of interaction that is unproductive, and then beginning to wage war on the cycle, not on each other.

Lee: That's a powerful question.

Chad: That's just boiling it down, to try and leave with that message to take a step back from fighting each other, and fight the cycle which you got caught up in.

Lee: Right. I love it. Chad, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Chad: Well, Lee, I appreciate your invitation. I've definitely listened to many podcasts that you've had before and it's very helpful to us as professionals. I hope that couples that are listening to these shows are getting a lot out of it as well.

Lee: To find out more about Chad Jordan and Systemic Health Resources you can go visit their website at www.shrinc.net or you can call them at 800-755-6309.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, we really appreciate your feedback and insights into the program. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can e-mail us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com, or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.