

Lee: "Fifty Shades of Grey". This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 211.

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

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your love life an erotic novel or an abusive nightmare? The "Fifty Shades of Grey" trilogy has steadily remained at the top of the New York Times Best Seller List over the past several months. The risqué nature of the book that once started out as Twilight fan fiction is catching the attention of men and women across the globe. Aptly named "Mommy Porn", the over the top erotic and abusive nature of the trilogy evokes visions of a modern version of the "Story of O". Questions about the nature of the intense relationship between the two main characters and the book's strong appeal to women are being discussed everywhere you turn. In marriage, how do you determine whether the dynamic between you and your spouse is healthy or abusive when behaviors encourage dominant and submissive relationships?

Colette Segalla is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. Colette is a psychotherapist with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she works with individuals and couples on issues ranging from anxiety and depression to problems in sexual intimacy. She enjoys working with couples to improve communication, connection and emotional and physical intimacy. Colette, welcome back to the show.

Colette: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Lee: OK, I have to confess. I have not read Fifty Shades myself.

Colette: Oh.

Lee: Should I?

Colette: Yes, I think you should.

Lee: Oh, my goodness. I assume you have read it?

Colette: Well, actually, I've read the first in the trilogy.

Lee: OK. Tell me what it's all about. Explain it to me. Tell me what's making this whole thing so controversial.

Colette: OK. Well, it's a series about the relationship between a young, inexperienced woman and a much more experienced, very wealthy and very handsome man. She's 22. She's just graduating from college, and he's about 27, and he's already a billionaire. She's lured into this relationship by the man based on his good looks, his wealth and power, and the fact that he takes an interest in her. She can't imagine why he'd be interested in

her. She's a student who works at the local hardware store to get herself through college, but he ends up becoming interested in her. Once his interest in her is clear, she then finds herself thinking about his offer to enter into a contractual relationship to be the sexual submissive to his dominance. The series is controversial because it depicts a normal young woman entering into a relationship and sexual practices that are generally considered to be outside the norm. It's revealing because the series has become so popular that it brings into question just how far outside the norm this kind of relationship is, if not in reality, at least, in fantasy.

Lee: Yeah. Wow. That is something. It's just amazing that it's catching on the way it is. I assume that this is not the relationship structure that most couples knowingly enter into. If it was, I think we'd see a lot of couples walking one another around on a leash in the neighborhood each night or something. In your more practical relationship, how are these roles started? How does that go?

Colette: In the world of BDSM, that stands for Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism, the roles of Dom and Sub, or Dominant and Submissive, would actually be entered into by consent of both people. But in the mainstream world, these roles are not entered into voluntarily. In fact, our values as a culture generally go against domination and submission because we place such emphasis on equality and free will. So in a relationship when there's a clear pattern on dominance of one person over another, it sometimes comes about through a kind of silent compliance with this inequality in the relationship. Sometimes, the imbalance comes about when there is verbal and emotional abuse going on, which over time can be overpowering.

In other cases, there is a struggle for power in a relationship, with each person trying to find a way to get their needs met, and they can't establish a healthy dynamic between them. In any of these cases in real life marriages when there's dominance of one person over another emotionally or physically, this is the result of an inability to establish a healthy exchange between partners. Sometimes, the belief is that one person deserves to be dominant of the other.

Lee: Gotcha. Now, from what you've said, and what I hear people saying at the water cooler about Fifty Shades, the book, and books like this, tend to focus on physical punishment as a mechanism of power for one of the partners over the other, but what I'm hearing from you is that in these relationships in real life, when you step off the pages of a novel, that the emotional manipulation is more common in terms of power than physical manipulation. Tell me what you define as emotionally abusive. What's the story there?

Colette: An emotionally abusive relationship is one in which a genuine, authentic engagement with one another is lacking. Instead, there is inequality. There is competition. There is manipulation and hostility. There's a lot of control and a lot of negation, of one person negating the other. It's a general pattern of one person not recognizing the other person as an individual, and not recognizing the value of the other person and his or her

thoughts, their feelings, and their behaviors, what they're doing. That's an emotionally abusive relationship.

Lee: Do people recognize that they're in a relationship like that?

Colette: Well, the trouble is that often in relationships that are emotionally or verbally abusive, it's difficult to be clear about what is abusive. When there's physical abuse, it's pretty clear. What happens when there's emotional mistreatment and abuse is there's no bruises. There's no bodily contact, and the emotional abuse gets interwoven into all of the interaction in the marriage. Marriages are complex. In the interactions there's a lot of different dynamics going on, so it's not uncommon for abusive behaviors to just be overlooked or diminished or dismissed. They go unnoticed.

Lee: Right. If they're not recognizing that they're in an emotionally abusive relationship, can you give us some examples of situations that might be a problem?

Colette: Yeah. A typical, but not so dramatic, and this is why it's important, example, is when one person maybe, feels hurt from something the partner has said to her and tells him so. The mistreatment is then being told, "You're overreacting. You're making a big deal over nothing." What's happening here is the person is being invalidated. What she's saying is being dismissed and not seen as a valid statement. Another example is when one person yells and screams at the other, trying to dominate the person by running over them emotionally, or when angry reactions become so routine that the other person feels like they have to walk on eggshells, and it's not safe to bring up anything that might cause a tirade. Those are examples of emotional abuse that people kind of get accustomed to, and they don't necessarily think of them as abusive.

Lee: Right. There are places that people can go when they're in a physically abusive relationship, but that's not true when there's emotional abuse. There really aren't shelters or centers for emotional abuse. Do people find emotional abuse to be less significant than physical abuse?

Colette: Well, that's the problem. Emotional abuse is usually more insidious than physical abuse. Unhealthy patterns can set in slowly and behaviors leaning towards abusive, like I said, might not be recognized at the beginning. And then the unhealthy dynamic becomes a part of every day life, and it's difficult to put a stop to it, because where do you begin? If a person is not being physically hit or punched or harmed in some way, it's much easier to deny that abuse is going on, and to downplay the significance of it. The person who is being abused might even start to think, "Oh. I'm just making a big deal over nothing. It's not that bad. If I toughen up, this just won't get to me."

Emotionally abusive relationships are usually more harmful than physical abuse because of the insidious nature of it. Emotional abuse tends to erode away a person's sense of self, and chip away at her self-esteem. This in itself undermines her ability to put a stop to the abusive behaviors, and the cycle continues.

Lee: Right. What's the impact of the emotional abuse on the couple's relationship? How do you see that playing out?

Colette: With couples having this kind of dynamic between them, self-esteem becomes damaged, resentment and anger build up. There's a sense of hopelessness that sets in, and the couple does not feel confident in their relationship with one another. It becomes a source of tension and conflict, and they're not able to enjoy their partnership with one another. They're not able to have a supportive relationship. Rather than the marriage being kind of a safe haven, and a place where they get support and love from one another, it becomes the biggest source of tension and conflict and all kinds of negative feelings.

Lee: Clearly, not that I had any real doubt about it, but physical abuse is not good for marriages, nor is emotional abuse, so what gives? Given that this is not good stuff, why has "Fifty Shades of Grey" taken off like a rocket ship? What's with that, especially with women? Why are they reading and buying this thing?

Colette: Yeah. That's a really interesting question. It's kind of an international phenomenon, what's happening with these books. But actually, in "Fifty Shades of Grey", it's not so much about emotional abuse the way we would see it in real life marriages. The connection is that there is this strong theme of dominance, but in the book it's entered into by consent of both people, so it kind of begs the question, "Why would women be attracted to a book where a woman is consenting to be in a submissive position?" That's the big question. The book does explore the relationship between pleasure and pain and the nature of trust and intimacy, and that question of equality in the relationship.

Personally, I see this book as kind of tapping into the Cinderella Fantasy, because you've got the powerful, wealthy, good-looking man and the average woman being swept off her feet, but it's like a Cinderella story with a kinky twist. Embedded in the Cinderella story is the erotica. Evidently, that's been really popular with a very wide audience.

Lee: Right. Evidently. Yeah. Based on what I see at the book store in the front window. Let's say, you're living a real life Fifty Shades-esque relationship. Maybe, not with a billionaire, but you have a relationship where you're finding that you are the submissive spouse, and you're not really happy about it. Where do you go? What do you do?

Colette: This is a great question, and I'm going to answer it in a couple of different ways. In real life relationships, if there's one person who is in a submissive role in the sexual relationship, the first step is to recognize it and get in touch with her own feelings about it. This can be done through self-reflection and the other kinds of things you would do to clarify your own feelings about something. Talk about it with friends, journal about it, learn more about it. It can be explored with a therapist. Then, when the issue is more clear to the person in the submissive role, and she has a better understanding of her own feelings about it, it can be brought up with the spouse, either with the help of a couple's therapist, or if the communication skills are good, then the couple can set aside some time and sit down and talk about it openly and honestly.

In this case, it would be really important for the person who ended up in a submissive role to speak from her own experience and express what it is she's discovered about her own participation in the dynamic. On the other hand, in real life relationships where submission is not the agreed-upon arrangement for sexual relations, as described in the book, but it comes about through a pattern of emotional abuse, it is really important for the person who is suffering the abuse to recognize the emotionally abusive behavior and then to take active steps to stop it. This is where having the help of a professional is really important for guidance and support. Sometimes, the person is afraid to bring up issues that need to be discussed, for fear of the partner's response. In this case, she might be walking on eggshells all the time, for fear of an attack, and might feel helpless to do anything about it. She might feel defeated and believe that nothing has changed, because there's a good chance that she's already tried to stop it in some ways.

It's really important to get an understanding of what's going on and to learn ways to put a stop to it, because not only does a person's self-esteem suffer when this is going on, but the person is most likely going to be emotionally withdrawing from the relationship, because it's too painful to stay engaged. She's just surviving the next storm, and that takes the place of a healthy give and take between partners.

Lee: Right. My reaction to that sort of situation is to look at the submissive spouse, and say, "Hey. You ought to run away from this situation," but the whole point of our show is helping people figure out how to stay married. Is it possible? Is there any way to repair the damage to that relationship and get a fresh start?

Colette: Yeah. In the book, "Fifty Shades of Grey", the main character, Christian Grey, he's presented as having a need to be dominant because of past abuses he's suffered. There's certainly some truth to the idea that when a person suffers abuse in childhood, it has an impact on adult relationships, but it doesn't mean that the personality and abusive pattern or dominance is set in stone, and can't be changed, if he has a desire to change. If a person who has become dominant and abusive cannot learn to take ownership of his behavior and be responsible for himself in the relationship, then this is an indication that the dynamic won't change, and it's necessary to leave the relationship at that point, because otherwise the abuse will continue.

Studies show that there's a good possibility that it can escalate and become physically dangerous. Before this determination can be made, the person who is being abused has the responsibility of learning how to take care of herself, to be clear about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, as far as treatment, and learning how to set healthy boundaries around what is not acceptable. A lot of times in relationships where they become emotionally abusive, both parties are kind of trapped in that dynamic, and even the person who is abusing may not understand just how his or her behavior is abusive. There's really a learning process, but it's more than an intellectual learning. It has to be accompanied by the boundary setting and actions that help change the pattern in the relationship.

Lee: So there is hope?

Colette: There is hope. Absolutely, there is hope. If the person who is being abused can learn how to be clear and consistent with boundaries, and the person who is abusing learns to respect these boundaries, and has a desire to adjust the dynamic, then things can change. Trust can definitely begin to be re-established, and when there's improved trust, then the couple has an opportunity for greater intimacy.

Lee: Right. Good to know. I will say, I'm surprised that you're optimistic, but you're the professional, and you're sitting there working with folks that are going through this all day, every day. If you think it can work, then I know it can. We've covered a lot of ground today, and a lot of interesting issues, breaking fresh ground for our show, I think. What else do we need to know before we let you go?

Colette: Well, I just think the whole point about getting support and recognizing and understanding the unhealthy behavior patterns in the relationship is so important, and to change things in the relationship. Otherwise, chances are that all efforts to change things are for naught. They're not going to be effective. It's really important to get support to make these kinds of changes in a relationship.

Lee: Fantastic. Colette, thank you so much for being with us on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Colette: You're quite welcome. Glad to be here.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about Colette Segalla and her practice at Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, you can visit their website at lepageassociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. It's L-E-P-A-G-E Associates.com. You can also reach their office at (919) 572-0000. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this episode and future episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com, or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.