

Lee: I bet you think this marriage is about you. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 219.

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'm your host today, Welcome to the show. Does your partner think the world revolves around them? There's a lot of encouraging information out there to help troubled marriages survive. But when it comes to marriages where one spouse suffers from narcissism, there are very few resources available on how to make it work. Some statistics suggest that many troubled marriages contain one partner who has some degree of narcissism, and unfortunately the outcome is pretty predictable. When one spouse suffers from narcissism, whether or not it has been diagnosed, it causes extreme stress on the marriage. Usually, the other spouse recognizes the imbalance in the relationship, repeatedly tries to fix the issues, and unfortunately is unable to make a change.

To help us understand what life is like with a narcissistic partner and to shed some light on how to work to make a marriage successful when one spouse is narcissistic, let's talk with marriage and family therapist, John O'Donoghue. John works out of John O'Donoghue Therapy Services in Raleigh, North Carolina, to provide psychotherapy to individuals, couples, and families. John, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could be with us.

John: It's great being here with you Lee. Thank you.

Lee: Let's kick this off with the most basic of questions. From a psychological standpoint, what would you define as narcissism?

John: Narcissism is a term that a lot of people use, and it's confusing because there's healthy narcissism and unhealthy narcissism. Loving oneself is important so you can love other people and be kind to other people. But when it crosses over into an extreme focus on self, then you're getting into the clinical area of a personality disorder called "Narcissistic Personality Disorder". And a quick way to define it for me, I think of it as a perceptual way of looking at the world where your cognitive system, your attention goes towards self and for reasons that are not well understood. Some people feel more connected to other people; some people have more of a sense of justice, care about the world, world hunger, the suffering of other people. Other people, more narcissistic people don't. Everything refers back to themselves. So that is sort of an overview of what ideas, probably the most hurtful part of it is that they don't experience the empathy that you or I might experience for somebody else. And that probably causes the most pain in their marriages and people who they come in contact with. And they are often very successful people, so I think they dole out a lot of pain in the world. So that's a quick definition.

Lee: Right. Well, that's interesting and I get the sense that it's sort of on a continuum, like you said, there's healthy and there's unhealthy, and I guess a lot of people fall somewhere in between. Let me ask you this, you're seeing couples every day that are dealing with marriage issues. Is this issue, the narcissistic personality disorder, is that a rare thing for you to see in a couple or is it a common thing?

John: Well, it's not rare. Obviously, I see a huge population of marriages that are in a lot of trouble. And it's my observation that often since there's so much self-help available in the world now, people use marriage counseling when things are really at a crisis state. Usually, women come to me about how to deal with their narcissistic husband, and I'm going to say that it's more common for males to exhibit this narcissistic personality. But often, well not often, but there are times when I'm seeing a couple when I

will start to realize that one of them is narcissistic and it's not uncommon. I would say 20 to 30% of the couples I see one partner is narcissistic.

Lee: What are the signs, what are the symptoms that you see that make you think that's what's going on?

John: Well, in the session if one person is self-referring most of the time, if one partner doesn't really listen or seem to care what the other partner is saying, that's a clue. A repeated request by one partner for the other to change something and it doesn't get changed, that's a big red flag. A different set of rules. Narcissistic people have one set of rules for themselves, and another set for everybody else, and that usually starts to show up.

Lee: Right, right. Very interesting. So when people are going through...they're in marriage counseling and obviously things are not working. There's a lot of drama, you know, we're in crisis. You're in the room, you're an expert. How do you pick apart the normal sort of drama, upset, and emotion that goes on in a marriage that comes apart and figure out that this is really about narcissism? It seems like that would be a tough environment in order to figure this out.

John: Yeah, well, in that environment when it's happening, one of the main tools that I use - I'm sure every marriage therapists uses - is to have each partner hear what the other one is saying and to reflect back to what they just heard. Often, one partner or both partners simply want to be heard and understood by the other. And that can go a long way towards resolving issues. Where you start to realize that one partner might be narcissistic is, is that that process just gets derailed. It's like, did you hear what was just said. Show your partner that you do understand. It can get very confusing and frustrating. That's when I start thinking there might be a problem with lack of empathy here because there can often be intractable assistance on getting back to their point of view. And we are going to see it my way, my way or the highway. So that is a big clue for me when that process of trying to get one partner to just listen and reflect back is difficult.

Lee: Right, right. I hear you that make a lot sense. What are some of the issues then that a couple has to work through when one partner has either a narcissistic personality disorder or, I guess, at a minimum a high degree of narcissism. What are the issues they've got to work through?

John: I think the hardest issue for the non-narcissistic partner is to somehow deal with the lack of empathy in their partner. Hopefully, to understand it, to not take it personally. Maybe, to understand also that if they're looking for fairness and an equitable solution to some problems, that's probably not going to happen. In my experience, a lot of problems with couples that happen across all couples is that each wants to impose their view of the situation on the other, and they have a hard time accepting their differences because they feel close and they want the other person to see it the same way. But often, people will not see it the same way and that's just the way it is. In a marriage where one partner is not narcissistic, they really have to accept that there's going to be two very different views of many situation and just accept that and live with it.

Lee: Is it worth it? Obviously, the goal of our show is to help people figure out how to stay married, but is it worth doing if this is the scenario you're dealing with?

John: It is if the non-narcissistic partner weighs the benefits and non-benefits of being with their partner. Frequently, the people with narcissism, and let's say it's not pathological narcissism because on

the continuum that you mentioned earlier, the far end of that continuum is being a psychopath, is being a sociopath, being an anti-social personality, like Saddam Hussein, or somebody like that. But say it's in the normal range, very often narcissist people are successful, they make money, they're exciting, they have a vitality because they're full of themselves, they're inflated, dramatic and exciting in certain ways. And those are qualities that the partner must've been attracted to, and they might outweigh the negative qualities of a lack of empathy, lack of fairness, being controlling. I always say that not all control freaks are narcissists, but all narcissists are control freaks. And generally, they're always late. And that's one other going back to one of your earlier question. If you want to know if somebody might be narcissist, ask yourself, "Are they late?" Often, they are late. And, that's an irritant that one partner must live with, but is it outweighed by those benefits that I mentioned?

Lee: Right, right.

John: And the last one is that narcissistic people need other people, and breaking an attachment is very difficult for them. To understand that it might not feel like they love you but they do, and they need you desperately, and if you leave them they will feel a huge pain that's not normal either.

Lee: Right. Does a narcissist know what they're doing? Do they have any clue that they're being this way?

John: I don't think they really do. They are often described as non-self-aware and you can see it. Just real quickly, I don't want to get into the politics. But when you Newt Gingrich won one primary, the South Carolina primary, he started to rhapsodize about his first day in office and how he would be walking down the boulevard and then heroically go back and sign various bills. He got caught up in this fantasy that to other people seemed ridiculous but he was not aware of it. And when it was mentioned to him, he just said he didn't see anything wrong with it. Frequently they're not, they have a hard time really seeing what they're doing. It can look really crazy, sometimes.

Lee: Right, right. So obviously, or I guess the narcissist doesn't intend to hurt their spouse. When you've got one of these folks in the room, when you're dealing with a couple, what sort of adjustments do you advise them to make so that they can stay married? What do they need to do?

John: The narcissist or the...?

Lee: Well, I guess both of them. How do you advise these folks?

John: When you said that they don't intend to hurt their spouse, I'm not sure that's really true. They can be very punishing and punitive. They might not feel bad about it or feel the empathy. Sometimes, they do. The narcissist usually makes a determination also, himself, "Do I want to be with this person?" If they are given consequences and they understand that they could suffer, be punished, they could feel pain by not changing in certain ways, then they often will make that determination, that choice. Especially, if infidelity is frequent. If one partner is unfaithful and repeatedly unfaithful and they're narcissistic, they won't really see any benefit in changing, they'll see the benefit of not getting caught. But if they know that if they do get caught that will be the end of the marriage, no questions, that's what they're risking. Well, then they can sort of weigh the benefits and say, "OK, I'm not going to risk that." The other partner needs to just magnify their skills of what all married couples need is to accept their partner for who they are and not take things personally.

Set boundaries. Have a certain set of boundaries that they are inviolable. But aside from that, it's not generally considered to be a very happy outcome to be in the long-term, to be married to a narcissistic person because it kind of gets worse over time. The definition of a personality disorder is that it doesn't really get better. That's why the insurance companies won't reimburse, for example, for the treatment of narcissistic personality. And so, it's kind of learning to live with certain things that are difficult in exchange for certain other benefits.

Lee: Right, right. I hear you. It sounds like you're making a lot of tradeoffs, and ultimately you may not be thrilled with what you've got because the situation may get worse and worse. I've got to ask you, you're sitting down with a lot of these folks, you're giving a lot of advice, you're helping them work through these issues. How likely are they to stay together and make the relationship work? What are the odds for these folks?

John: It all depends on the severity of the problem on the continuum that you mentioned. A) how likely is it that it's going to work, is that what you asked?

Lee: Well, yeah.

John: It's not likely that the non-narcissistic partner is ever going to feel loved, I believe, in a way that other people will. But if they could understand that their partner is loving them as best they can in their own way, then that can be fulfilling. And it depends on whether the narcissistic partner crosses over the line repeatedly and engages in behaviors that are intolerable. So you know, I wish I could answer that question, I really don't know what that answer would be.

Lee: Yeah, it's a struggle. No, I hear you.

John: Because it's so complicated. Narcissism has been the conundrum of psychology ever since Freud. There have been every possible explanation for it and nobody's ever really figured it out. Now, I believe that the prevailing opinion is that it's built into the human genome, into the DNA of the human race to further the race, to propel to make advances. And it's very complicated.

Lee: Right.

John: It's something I don't pretend to understand it completely, and I don't think anybody does.

Lee: So let me ask you this. The likelihood is that it's not the narcissist that's listening to us today. It's more likely the person married to the narcissist. Final words of advice for that person before we let you go? Any last words of wisdom that might be helpful to that person?

John: If you're married to one?

Lee: Yeah.

John: I would say understand that he needs you, he does love you. He doesn't have the same perceptual apparatus that you have. It's not really his fault. He was likely born that way. And realize that every person has good points and bad points, and these are certain bad points that are difficult but you fell in love with this person with certain reasons and focus on those reasons. And if you can also understand

that the most intoxicating thing for a narcissistic is to attend to them, love them, flatter them, and build up their inflated sense of self. They will love you for that. The most painful thing for them is to ignore them. So I would advise all of those things.

Lee: Right, right. Good advice. John, thank you so much for spending the time with us and talking through these issues with us. I really appreciate it.

John: That's really been my pleasure Lee. Thank you so much for asking me.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about John's practice, there's a website. He's in Raleigh, North Carolina, but let me give you the website address. It's johndonoghetherapy.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes but let me spell it for you. It's J-O-H-N-O-D-O-N-O-G-H-U-E-T-H-E-R-A-P-Y dotcom, johndonoghetherapy.com. You can also reach his office at 919-341-2477. 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, you can 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.