

Anna: How to Argue and Save Your Marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 242.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is there a right and a wrong way to argue in a marriage? The answer is yes, and the secrets out; there is a right way and a wrong way to argue. Oftentimes when couples fight, it becomes husband versus wife, him against her. The issue with that, however, is that the entire sense of the team attitude within the couple gets lost in the mess. With a relationship, it's not about not getting angry or not disagreeing, because that's unrealistic. The true key is staying emotionally connected to someone you view as a teammate in a generally positive way.

According to relationship expert John Gottman, there are two types of problems within relationship: Resolvable and perpetual, and 2 out of 3 problems are perpetual. Luckily, there are conflict skills for each kind that couples can learn and use to ultimately strengthen their marriages. Our guest today is Eric Blythstone, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with LePage Associate. After more than 10 years of clinical work with adults, couples, children and families, Erica has seen her fair share of conflict within relationships, and she says there's a way to manage it effectively and to a point that actually strengthens relationships. Welcome to the show Erica. I'm so glad that you could be with me today.

Erica: Thanks Anna. Glad to be here.

Anna: I'm sure you've seen a good bit of conflict between partners and within relationships, but how do you determine what's good conflict and what's bad conflict?

Erica: In healthy and effective conflict, partners stay on the team, and there are still a lot of positive or neutral feelings present during the conflict. In unhealthy and ineffective conflict, there's this sense of competition rather than team, and there's a lot of negative emotion or maybe emotional disconnect. Also, there are certain things that you can do during a conflict that will make for a good conflict and help the relationship, long-term.

Anna: Okay. Then if we're talking about a team mentality versus the individual mentality, as far as arguing goes, or in an argument, in a fight, or conflict within relationships, what are some of the differences between those, between the team mentality and the individual mentality?

Erica: With the team mentality, you pretty much want everyone to feel good about themselves, the relationship, and the outcome. With an adversarial mentality, your focus changes; you want to win, which means your partner needs to lose. Even the

nicest person can get caught up in being manipulative and unkind in order to win. Or your goal might be to get your partner to agree with you and join your side, in which case you don't have an open mind to hearing their side and finding a compromise. Or you might be so angry and so overwhelmed that you disconnect emotionally, which is extremely damaging to a relationship.

Anna: What happens when people disconnect emotionally?

Erica: Emotional disconnect over and over during conflict is one the predictors of a divorce later on in the relationship. That's going to be the long-term outcome with that.

Anna: Right. Okay. Let's talk about the two different kinds of problems that John Gottman was talking about: Resolvable and perpetual. What are some of the main differences between those?

Erica: Resolvable problems are the ones that you can problem-solve; who makes dinner and who does the dishes, or how to change the budget so you can live in a nicer place. Perpetual problems are the ones that never get solved because they come from a difference in needs or personality. Examples of perpetual problems might be differences in the amount of sex that each person wants or arguments around socializing, because one person's an introvert and the other's an extrovert.

Anna: All right. For a couple that might be listening, how would they determine . . . or if you were seeing a couple in therapy, how would you determine what kinds of problems or issues are present in the relationships, whether they're resolvable or perpetual?

Erica: Everyone's got both kinds, and like you mentioned before, the vast majority of everyone's problems in a relationship are perpetual. 69% of all conflicts are about perpetual problems. The way I tell it in session is if it's something that can be problem-solved it's a resolvable problem. If it's something that keeps coming up and really has to do with inherent differences; personality differences, differences in the people's needs, those are perpetual, and you need to work more on accepting them and accepting your partner with this difference, with this problems, and coming to a compromise, rather than problem-solving it to make it go away.

Anna: Just a minute ago, you kind of started to talk a little bit about the predictors of divorce. What have become some of the biggest predictors of divorce, as far the two different types of problems go?

Erica: Gottman's come up with a few strong predictors of divorce, and one of them is increasing negativity during conflict; that's a predictor of early divorce. Like I mentioned before, if you're not engaging in conflict at all and there's this emotional disconnect, that's a predictor for later divorce. Then he's come up with

other predictors of divorce that feeds into some of the coping skills that we're going to talk about today.

Anna: When you say early divorce, is there a timeframe for that, within 5 years or within 10 years?

Erica: That's a good question. I'm not sure of the timing. I know that it comes from not being able to resolve things. Things get negative early on, and then after a while you just give up, so that's when you start to disengage; that's why that's a later predictor of divorce. I don't know what the timing is on that.

Anna: It totally seems like increasing . . . or if your conflict and your fights are always filled with extreme negativity, then you'd start to develop feelings of animosity and almost contempt for your partner in some situations.

Erica: Yeah. Actually, that's one of the things we're going to be talking about in a moment. Contempt is a huge problem when it rears its head in relationships. That's a big predictor of divorce.

Anna: Okay. All right. What do you see couples doing on their own to try to fix some of these big issues?

Erica: People will often get caught up in defending themselves, maybe they up the ante and attack, or they disengage. All these are really understandable responses; it's just that they're not very helpful in conflict with your partner. It's easy to get stuck in a dynamic that doesn't work. A really common one with couples is the avoider/nagger dynamic. One person . . . and talking about a heterosexual marriage, and I'll stereotype here because this is what I often see. Usually they guy will agree to do something, and then for some, reason he doesn't do it. Maybe he forgets, he was busy doing something else, or maybe he didn't plan to do it but didn't know how to say no to the request. Then when he doesn't do it, when this happens a few times, the partner starts nagging because she's learned that she needs to remind him or push him to get this thing done. The problem is nagging sends the message that you think the other person's incompetent, and that decreases the chance that the person will do anything at all, and leads to more nagging. You can see the cycle.

Anna: Yeah, cycle, definitely.

Erica: You need to be able to recognize what's not working and they try something new. Today, I wanted to talk about some things to try that should get some better results during conflict.

Anna: Yeah, Okay. For sure. What are some of those conflict resolution skills that you would recommend to couples for, let's start with resolvable problems?

Erica: Okay. One strong predictor of a conflict not turning out well is a harsh startup. The antidote to this is a soft startup. There's a huge difference between sayings, "I can't believe you forgot to feed the dog again. What's wrong with you?" versus, "Hey. I think you forgot to feed the dog tonight." A soft startup is particularly important for women because we're the ones who bring up an issue 80% of the time.

Anna: Interesting.

Erica: Yeah, it is interesting. All these skills feed into each other, so you'll see that in a second. Another skill has to do with Gottman calls the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse, because they're such strong predictors of divorce. They are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. Criticism attacks a person's character, like in the example I gave a moment ago. As much as possible, you want to issue complaints instead of criticism, because complaints just have to do with you being unhappy about this one event rather than being unhappy with your partner's character in general.

Anna: Right.

Erica: We all know what defensiveness is, and the antidote to this is taking responsibility. You can see how these work together. It's easier to take responsibility when your partner has used a soft startup. If you yell at me for not feeding the dog again and ask what's wrong with me, I'm more likely to say, "Give me a break. I've fed the dog 90% of the time without a problem. If you just suggest that I've forgotten tonight, I'm more likely to say, "I'm so sorry. I'll go do that right now."

Anna: Right.

Erica: Contempt, which you mentioned before, that has to do with feeling superior to your partner, and this is most damaging of the 4 Horsemen. It sends a message of disgust about your partner and really sets up this hierarchy of who's better than who: Eye rolling, sarcasm, cynicism, mockery, hostile humor, all of these are examples of contempt. The antidote is a culture of appreciation for each other and being able to maintain that during a conflict. If you're appreciative of someone, you're not undervaluing them and thinking they're less than.

The last of the Horsemen is called stonewalling, and that's when a partner disengages emotionally, which we've talked about is a predictor of later divorce. This would look like ignoring your upset spouse, pretending they're not upset, or avoiding them. These are all stonewalling, and they're all really harmful to a marriage. The antidote to stonewalling is self-soothing, because the idea is that if you're avoiding conflict, you're doing it to calm down. It just doesn't work and it makes everything worse. If you can learn to self-soothe physiologically, then you can do that instead of stonewalling.

Another skill that's really important during a conflict is accepting influence. This is hugely important for a sense of team. Being able to do it in an argument will help an argument stay healthy. This is one for the guys, since women tend to accept influence pretty easily. You want to notice when your partner has a good insight or suggestion during an argument, and this is easier to do if you haven't gotten off the team. Accepting influence is anything that shows that you value your partner's opinion; asking for their opinion before a purchase, or if you're in an argument, saying, "That's a good idea. I see what you mean." Another skill is being able to deescalate things when they get too intense and negative; anything that brings it down a notch. This can be taking a break to calm down or you can deescalate with repair attempts. Repair attempts are the secret weapon of healthy relationships. It's when you say or do something that keeps the negativity during a conflict from getting out of control. It can be as obvious as saying you're sorry, or it can be more lighthearted, like poking fun at yourself or at your partner, if you can do it without seeming cruel. Being silly in some way, acknowledging something good your partner did; anything that diffuses the negativity of the situation.

Anna: That's good.

Erica: Even statements like, "You're yelling at me. You're getting off topic"; these are considered repair attempts, because the point of them is to bring the negativity down a notch. The more you can make repair attempts and notice when your partner does, and take advantage of them, that's going to make for much healthier conflict, which overall is going to make for a healthier relationship. The last one is compromise. Again, working towards what the team wants not just you. It'll often mean that you have to give something up, so it's a good idea to have a pretty clear idea of what's most important to you and respect that your partner will also have things that they can't budge on.

Anna: Right. [inaudible: 13:49]. Those are some good tips and skills that couples can definitely use for those resolvable problems. Okay. What about skills that you recommend for those perpetual problems? The ones that we were saying before: 2 out of 3 conflicts or problems in relationships are perpetual. What kind of skills would you suggest to couples for those?

Erica: This is really important, since most of the problems are perpetual. All those same skills apply to perpetual problems, but with perpetual problems, you have to have some level of acceptance of the problem since it's not going to go away. My example before, of who's going to make dinner and who's going to the dishes; you can't just accept that because dinner and the dishes will never get done, you have to problem solve. With perpetual problems, they're not going to go away because they have to do with some inherent difference in each person's needs and personality. You have to be able to accept the problem and accept your partner in the context of the problem. You want to avoid gridlock, which is where no

progress can be made, and either negativity builds or you disengage. What you want to do is keep up a dialogue about the problem with a generally positive or neutral affect. This doesn't mean that you can never get angry, but you need to find a way to be angry or annoyed with your partner while still loving them and staying on the team.

An example of this is when one person is the type who when they decide to leave a party they say 'goodbye', and then they leave, but their partner is a long goodbye-r; they'll say 'goodbye', and then 2 hours later, they're still only halfway to the door. If you get angry about this every time, you're going to maybe start taking two cars to every party, maybe you'll interact less while you're there, or maybe you'll stop going to parties completely because it always ends in a fight. If you can accept this difference as a perpetual problem, you'll be able to chuckle about it and tease each other, and work with your partner to figure out the timing of leaving, get to some sort of compromise about it.

Anna: Right, that makes sense, for sure. I think that through all of this, it seems like the main point is that not all conflict really is bad, and couples can learn to argue and manage their conflict as a team, and they can actually end up strengthening their marriages.

Erica: Yeah. I think conflict is like most other things we struggle with, it's not inherently good or bad, but there are healthy and unhealthy, and effective and ineffective ways to handle it. Conflict is really important for a relationship. First of all, it's inevitable. Second of all, a lot of trust and love is built when you know that you can talk about a problem with your partner, and instead of being mean or pulling away, they'll hear your side of things and they'll try to work with you to keep everyone as happy as possible because they care about you. Being able to work through hard times strengthens friendship which is the basis for any healthy marriage.

Anna: Erica, is there anything else that we should know?

Erica: Yeah, there's one last tidbit that can be helpful with this stuff. Gottman's studies show that a 5-to-1, positive-to-negative affect ratio can be very helpful in keeping a conflict healthy. For every negative interaction during a conflict, try to have 5 positive or neutral interactions. This may feel kind of forced or formal at first, but the more you do it, the more natural it'll become. It keeps the 4 Horsemen out completely, it keeps us open to accepting influence and compromising, and we won't even need to deescalate or issue repair attempts.

Anna: There you go. Erica, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Erica: Thanks for having me, Anna.

Anna: Of course. To find out more about Erica and her practice, LePage Associates, you can visit their website at www.LePageAssociates.com, and I'll spell that for you. Or you can call 919-572-0000, to make an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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