

Anna: The art of offering support. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 254.

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, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you giving your partner the support he or she needs and deserves? It's no secret that one of the most important factors in a successful relationship is how well the partners are able to support each other. To feel truly and unconditionally supported by a partner is something everyone wants, and it makes a world of difference in how a relationship is cared for and maintained.

The problem is that many people expect a good partner will instinctively know how to be supportive and will just say or do the right thing automatically. In reality, there are many different types of responses to stress and negativity, and what each partner needs to feel support is about personal preference and should actually be discussed openly.

Our guest today is Dr. Gabriella Johr, a licensed clinical psychologist with Orenstein Solutions. With a specialization in child and family therapy, Gabriella has had a great deal of experience helping married couples find the right ways to offer support, and she's here to share some of her pointers and tips. Welcome to the show, Gabriella. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Gabriella: It's great to be here.

Anna: Great to have you. If we're talking about this whole big element of support in a relationship which obviously is a pretty big thing what is the biggest misconception that you see between partners when it comes to being supportive of each other?

Gabriella: I see a breakdown often occurs when partners kind of expect each other to just, like you said, instinctively know how to be supportive, and the misconception is that if you have to spell it out for someone, it's some kind of sign that the person doesn't care or isn't thoughtful or doesn't know you well enough to know how to comfort you. Believing that your partner needs to be a mind reader is a little unrealistic and sets you up for disappointment because they can't be a mind reader, but this is a very common misconception or expectation.

A lot of couples, they kind of get into this cycle where there's a mismatch between behavior and perception. What I mean by that is one person believes that they're behaving in a supportive way, and the other person is perceiving that behavior as unsupportive. Over time, this mismatch can really cause a lot of problems for the couple.

Anna: Seems like they'd be on two totally different pages in that sense.

Gabriella: Absolutely.

Anna: How do partners become unrealistic about their support expectations? Where does that kind of begin? Where does that start?

Gabriella: It's something that happens frequently, and it just really is a wish for your partner to know you well. Everyone wants to feel like their partners really know them so it's just a common wish, but unfortunately it is unrealistic because what comforts someone is so subjective, and it really can even vary across situations. Something might work - if you come home from work and you have a stressful time one thing might work where we're going to talk about the different ways you can kind of support someone, and then let's say if you have a problem with your family members you might need another kind of approach. It's really imperative for the couple to communicate directly about what works for each other and also not to assume that what works for you is going to work for your partner.

Anna: Right. Then I just kind of thought of an interesting thing that maybe you see, I don't know. How does the dynamic between men and women come into play with this? I'm sure that expectations vary, and do you see that happening sometimes just based on gender? You think about what women want and what men want kind of?

Gabriella: Sure. I mean there are some times, obviously gender plays a role, and there's certain preferences in terms of women might want more of listening and validation and talking about their feelings, and men may want someone to respond to them thinking about how to solve the problem, problem solving. I don't want to just kind of stereotype these kind of things, but I do think where gender plays a role is how comfortable someone feels being direct about what they need.

Unfortunately, based on our society and socialization, women may feel a little bit more comfortable being direct about their needs. For example, being direct is really more the important issue so, for example, if you come home from an awful day at work, and you express to your partner that you really need a hug, you're being direct, right? It's more clear to your partner what to do in order to be supportive, and then you're more likely to get what you need in that moment to feel better.

Compared to a person who walks through the door and says he had an awful day and just kind of leaves it at that. Clearly, this person wants a response but what to do is a lot more ambiguous, and it's not really clear what the best course of action would be to reduce this person's stress. For one person, a hug might feel comforting, but for another person it may make the person feel needy. There's no real correct way to respond, but it's more about what is the person's preference. It's really about personal preference.

Anna: Then when, if you have, for example, a couple coming to you with this kind of issue, what do you see happening in a relationship when there's a lack of support or more of a perceived lack of support?

Gabriella: When there's a mismatch, most people are in relationships where both people want to support each other. So, unfortunately, the person who does not feel supported obviously starts to feel angry, may withdraw from their partner, blame their partner, and feel dissatisfied, and overall there's a general sense where they devalue the partner. They're not giving them what they need, and they're pretty upset about it. On the other side, the person who thinks they are being supportive and giving to their partner really might start to feel frustrated, resentful, and just in

general feel taken for granted because they are trying and that kind of gets overlooked. There's a mismatch. They're both trying to do something, and it's just not working.

Anna: On the flip side, we're talking about a lack of support there. So on the other hand, what do you see happening in a relationship, or how can a relationship be transformed when there is this solid support between the two partners?

Gabriella: It makes a lot of difference. It certainly strengthens the relationship, and life is very stressful, life is very, very stressful. So if you feel like you have a rock, a person who just knows you so well, and you can come home at the end of the day and talk to that person and share with that person and feel like they get you. That really will sustain a relationship for the long haul.

Anna: You know how you're talking about the need to talk about the expectations and kind of making it known what you need and being really open about that and clear about that, how can partners have that conversation if it might be, maybe a little uncomfortable for them?

Gabriella: I think couples really need to consider we're going to talk about the various types of responses that partners can have. Certainly, what we're going to talk about today is not all the type of responses, but they need to kind of figure out what feels good to them. A lot of times what I see and knowing what feels good to you might feel like no-brainer, like it seems like, of course, you would know what feels good to you and how you would like someone to respond to you if you're stressed out, but what I see a lot in our practice is that most people don't know what would feel good to them, what's really supportive to them, what they need.

They just know that the other person's not really doing - it's not making them feel better. Sometimes in my practice I'll ask them, "Well, what do you need your partner to say?" It's kind of difficult. They're not quite sure. I think the first step is to know your personal preferences and subjectively what feels supportive to you. If you don't know that, you can't express it to your partner. Then the second step would be to communicate this to your partner.

Anna: What are some of the skills that you would suggest to couples and even individuals to start doing this and developing the support type of thing?

Gabriella: I guess there's kind of different types of support so for people to individually think subjectively, "What would feel good to me?" These are different types of support that I came up with, and like I said, these are definitely not the only types of support, but the first one is listening. You can't go wrong with listening, and it seems so simple but giving someone undivided attention, asking what happened and then listening with interest really does wonders.

The key here is to focus on what the person is saying without distraction. Even if you carve out a little bit of time, and most people lead very busy lives, really just to focus on what the person's saying and to ask them what happened. Listening is key.

Some people really, reassurance helps them feel better. Telling someone, "It'll be OK. You'll work through it. This will blow over in a few days. Don't worry," can feel reassuring when it's met with some listening. If someone just tells you, "You're going to be fine," and they don't

listen to the details of what happened, sometimes people can feel like it's a little bit dismissive. Reassurance is a little tricky. If you listen, typically, it can make someone feel better.

Validation, in my opinion, is the most difficult one to do, and yet it's the most powerful. This really requires you stepping into someone's shoes in order to imagine what it feels like to be in their position. The goal is to really communicate that you feel like how they're thinking and feeling about the situation is legitimate, like you get why they're upset. That really makes them feel like they're not alone. Everyone wants to feel like they're not crazy, what happened is really upsetting, and this requires you to kind of visualize your partner in that specific situation and kind of thinking about how would they feel in that?

You have to really listen to their perspective. You can't just pull from your own personal experience and start going on about, "When this happened to me this is how I felt." That can be invalidating. You really just want to say things like, "That sounds like it was really hard, or I can only imagine what that may have felt like for you. Are you OK? That sounded upsetting." That's a way to convey empathy.

Another approach to supporting someone is problem solving. Some people just rather come up with solutions to the problem, analyze, generate some ideas about how to solve the problem. Analyze what would work and just do something about it, and your role might be if someone's really upset to get them to kind of think of solutions that are not impulsive, that are not going to lead to disastrous reactions. You don't want to chew out your boss. You don't want to chew out a family member, and you want to kind of maybe gently point out, "This is a good solution to the problem," and that way you kind of are working together to problem solve.

Some people, really giving them space. Some people need to think through a situation and kind of process their feelings a little bit more, and if your partner comes home and you demand, you see that they're upset and you're demanding that they talk about what's going on when they're not really ready, that sometimes can lead to some tension. And with that said, eventually it would be nice if they would share with you what happened. You don't want to just always be not talking to your partner.

Then two more, sometimes doing something concrete like taking the burden off of, let's say, doing the laundry to help your wife relax or saying to your husband, "Why don't you just go out with some friends and grab a beer and let off some steam," can feel really supportive.

Anna: Definitely. It sounds like those are all great things and different ways to offer support, and it's really just about what each person needs and wants and how they cope with it and what they require for feeling that they're being supported.

Gabriella: It's just personal preference. Some of these things may work for one person in one situation, and it's really kind of knowing what would feel good to you and really feeling comfortable expressing that to your partner.

Anna: Well, Gabriella, is there anything else that you want to share with us today?

Gabriella: I would say that sometimes this stuff doesn't come naturally. If you're having difficulties, couples counseling really allows you to kind of practice these kind of interactions like in the moment, when a real situation arises how to really talk to your partner and discuss what would be supportive. Then you can kind of do it on your own at home, but the couples counseling really can make it become more of a natural experience and make it easier. It's like exercise. You practice it, and it gets easier.

Anna: Right. Well, Gabriella, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Gabriella: My pleasure. Thank you.

Anna: To find out more about Gabriella and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com and that's spelled O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N Solutions.com, or you can give them a call at 919-428-2766 to schedule an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and 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.

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.