

Scott: Managing an eating disorder in a marriage. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 282.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your spouse's eating disorder affecting your marriage? As a society we are growing more aware of mental and the effects it can have on an individual and their loved ones. We now observe National Mental Awareness Month in May each year to recognize and bring awareness about mental health disorders and the effects it has on the people suffering with the disorder.

Mental Awareness Month acknowledges disorders, such as depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder among many others. Now that we are aware what mental health disorders are and how they affect an individual, we now have to discover just how the disorder can affect those people close to the individual suffering.

Eating disorders, among those disorders, recognize in the National Mental Awareness Month. How can having an eating disorder affect a marriage? Earning her Master's in marriage, family, and child counseling from the Phillips Graduate Institute, Miss Deborah Klinger is founder of Deborah Klinger, M.A. LMFT PC in Durham, North Carolina.

Miss Klinger helps individuals, couples, and families dealing with a wide variety of issues. She has extensive experience in the field of eating disorders and has been certified as an Eating Disorder Specialist through the Association of Eating Disorders Professionals. Miss Klinger is published in Eating Disorders, the journal of treatment and prevention.

Welcome to the show. Deborah. I'm so glad you could join us today.

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

Scott: Well, let's dive right into this. I know that over the last three decades or so, terms like anorexia and bulimia have become more a part of our vocabulary, but I'm not sure that the effects of having an eating disorder are very well-known. I know I don't know much about it myself. Can you elaborate on what life may be like for someone who is struggling with an eating disorder?

Deborah: Yeah. Absolutely. And struggling is the right word because a person who has an eating disorder is struggling, and quite often they go to pretty great lengths not to let the people around them know that they are struggling.

There's a lot of shame involved which generates a lot of secrecy and depending on the kind of disorder that is to say whether it is more in the realm of anorexia manifesting more with restricting food and caloric intake and maybe exercising a lot, those kinds of things versus bulimia which involves usually bingeing on pretty large quantities of food and then doing something to compensate for that, purging by inducing vomiting or taking laxatives or doing

something else to compensate like exercising a lot or not eating for a couple of days after a binge or something, or just a binge eater who will binge eat and then not do something to compensate.

The more restrictive types of eating disorder behavior, calorie counting, and not eating certain types of foods, those kind of things, are usually thought of as good things by a person with an eating disorder. They feel good about it, and they don't want it taken away whereas bingeing, overeating, inducing vomiting, those kinds of things, people tend to not feel good about and have some shame around that and will probably hide it. So for various reasons people who are struggling with an eating disorder often will pretend like things are fine when they're not.

Scott: You say there's a lot of secrecy involved with it many of the times. Is there a real telltale sign that my significant other may be struggling with an eating disorder?

Deborah: Well, I don't think there's any one telltale sign. There are several to be on the lookout for. If that person will only eat certain types of food or only eat at certain restaurants or not eat after a certain time of night or they're spending a lot of time at the gym or a lot of time in the bathroom right after a meal, things like that are important to watch out for. Also if there is food missing from the cupboard or it seems like a lot of money is spent on groceries even though you haven't seen those groceries in the house, things like that.

Scott: Okay. What problems do you see that couples are experiencing in the relationship when one of them has an eating disorder?

Deborah: I call the eating disorder in the context of a relationship the invisible third party. It's almost as though the person with an eating disorder is having an affair. That's kind of the energy that it creates because their relationship with their eating disorder is so intense, and it pulls energy, emotional and heart energy away from the relationship with the spouse.

And it's important to understand that an eating disorder is a protective mechanism in some way. It protects the person who has it from feeling too vulnerable. It protects them from the fears they have, the deep fears of ending up alone and unloved. And so in a relationship what happens is it actually can create more distance between the two spouses in the relationship because the person with the eating disorder isn't fully authentic, isn't fully present.

As I said, so much of their emotional and heart energy is being diverted toward the eating disorder, and as the eating disorder progresses because they do progress, they are progressive illnesses, the effects of the eating disorder on the relationship become more intense.

Scott: At what point do you see the couples recognize that the eating disorder is disrupting the relationship? We kind of talked about can the other spouse recognize it, but are you seeing examples of where the couple realizes it's actually affecting the relationship?

Deborah: It usually takes a lot to get to that point, I would say, in my experience. The other spouse is more likely to recognize it. Again, in my experience that's what I've seen before the partner who actually has the eating disorder.

The other spouse is becoming upset by or disgruntled with their partner's lack of availability to go out, to socialize, to do things with other people because of their limitations on time because the person has to be at the gym or the kinds of restaurants they'll eat at or that kind of thing or shame around body image. It can interfere with sexual relationships because of shame around body image.

So usually it takes the non-eating disordered spouse starting to talk about the problems to the eating disordered spouse before they both recognize the impact on the relationship itself. The non-eating disordered spouse often won't understand that it's an eating disorder that's going on there. They'll just be experiencing these unpleasant things in their marriage, but they won't understand that it's an eating disorder that's the cause of it.

It usually happens after the honeymoon is over, so to speak, after the couple has been together for a while because since the eating disorder is protecting the one partner from being too vulnerable. That means they can't get too close because to have the kind of intimacy, and I mean emotional and intellectual intimacy and not necessarily sexual, the kind of intimacy that grows in a marriage.

Partners have to be vulnerable, and quite often a person with an eating disorder will naturally be attracted to somebody who has some issues of their own that prohibit them from being able to truly get too close which creates this sort of comfortable balance. So usually something has to get pretty bad before the couples recognize that the eating disorder is affecting their relationship badly.

Scott: Have you observed any trends or patterns among couples that have this issue? Does it affect a certain age group or demographic, or is it pretty much it can hit anybody?

Deborah: Well, sure. It pretty much can hit anybody but because eating disorders tend to start emerging in late adolescence, I usually see it in younger couples more often than not couples who haven't had children yet. Sometimes contemplating pregnancy and starting a family can bring the eating disordered issues to light.

I also see that quite often the person with an eating disorder will be attracted to a spouse who has, like I said before, some issues of their own, maybe alcohol or substance abuse issues. Quite often the spouse comes from an alcoholic family with alcoholic parents which creates a dynamic that makes living with somebody with something like an eating disorder familiar in a sort of dysfunctional way.

So I tend to see more often than not younger couples, not always but usually, younger couples, couples who haven't had kids yet, couples who are getting to know what it's like to be in a long-term committed relationship, like a marriage, and running into some roadblocks that the eating disorder is responsible for.

Scott: So once this couple identifies that, "Hey, we may have a problem here associated with this eating disorder," where do you start with them? What do you suggest that they do to manage an eating disorder in the relationship?

Deborah: The spouse with the eating disorder needs to go to therapy. I mean, this is something that requires treatment. It's not just a little problem. It's not going to go away on its own. It's a complicated illness, and it requires treatment. It requires help. So they need to go to therapy, and that usually also means working with a dietitian and maybe a physician to follow them medically.

Usually a whole treatment team is involved in working with somebody with an eating disorder. And then couples therapy is a really terrific idea. If that's not feasible because of finances or some other something or other that would make it so that it wouldn't be feasible to go into couples therapy, it is important that the non-eating disordered spouse attends the individual therapy session with their spouse periodically.

I always, when I'm working with somebody with an eating disorder, have their partner come in for sessions from time to time because the relational piece is just so big. Relationships are very much affected by eating disorders. In turn, the person with the eating disorder and their spouse are in this relationship that can have a really healing impact on the eating disorder if things are handled right.

I recommend that the spouse read up on eating disorders. There are some really good books for people who are family members and loved ones of somebody with an eating disorder, and I work with them to help them look at the eating disorder as something other than the person who has it because it can be really frustrating living with somebody with an eating disorder.

And the non-eating disordered spouse can find themselves feeling angry and irritated with their spouse because of the things they're doing. They won't eat enough, or they're going to the gym all the time, or they're leaving the table to go throw up right after this marvelous dinner that the spouse cooked.

And when both partners can see this eating disorder as something separate from the person, then they can align with one another against the eating disorder as a team and become a really powerful influence.

Scott: That's a great point. You mentioned picking up a book for the spouse who doesn't have the eating disorder. Are there any other? Maybe, we can narrow it down to another specific item or two that couples working on an issue like this that would help them resolve some of the negative issues?

Deborah: Yeah. There are some. You mean in terms of external resources or sort of techniques that they can employ? How do you mean?

Scott: Yeah. Just something that they could work on, whether together or independently.

Deborah: Yeah. They can work on identifying what they are feeling at any given moment, and learning to articulate that, and express it to their partner. This is in service of addressing the fears

of vulnerability that are in play in the relationship. And learning to intentionally make them feel vulnerable and work on creating safety and trust in a relationship is really important.

So learning how to convey to their partner what they're experiencing emotionally at any given time to their partner, what they're experiencing emotionally in response to what their partner says to them.

Those are building blocks for that safety and trust that makes a relationship healthy. That's number one really important, and number two making it safe to talk about the eating disorder to each other, kind of bringing it out of the shadows and into the light of day is a really important part of that.

So giving the spouse who doesn't have an eating disorder sort of a language for addressing what they're seeing and being able to even say, "Oh, this is what I see, and these are my concerns" and that kind of thing. And helping the spouse who has the eating disorder be able to talk about it without fear that her spouse is going to judge her or leave her or something like that.

Scott: It seems like we can't move away from it, no matter what issue we talk about with relationships, but the foundation always fall back on communication.

Deborah: Absolutely.

Scott: And I bet it's so challenging, especially in a dynamic like this where the person with the eating disorder has shame about it or has learned to try to keep it secret and then not being able to communicate about it, I'm sure would take a lot of work.

Deborah: Absolutely.

Scott: When couples are able to follow some of the suggestions that you're talking about and get into therapy to help manage the disorder? What are some of the positive changes that you're seeing and the quality and interaction of the relationship?

Deborah: Some of the positive changes are what I was speaking to before, the levels of safety and trust are increased. Both partners feel more relaxed and more comfortable with each other and with themselves and are able to become more playful and have more fun. Having the relationship be a safe harbor to talk about the issues that are underlying the eating disorder. Those speak to issues around self-esteem and self-worth and innate fears of not being lovable, those kinds of things.

Having a relationship. Having a partner with whom it's safe to talk about those things is very important. That's exactly what happens as the relationship improves when an eating disorder is being addressed and the person who has it is healing.

So it can really transform a relationship from being stuck at a certain level of distance and sort of a happy medium of not real closeness and not real health but sort of this is where we hang out

and it's fine to real intimacy, real closeness and the joy and happiness that comes from having that kind of connection with somebody.

Scott: Sure. Well, Deborah, I'm sure there's going to be listeners that seek out this episode because they have an eating disorder or possibly their spouse has an eating disorder. Is there anything else that you would like to let them know?

Deborah: Yeah. I think it's really important to keep in mind that eating disorders are not a choice. They're not about vanity. They are an illness. They have the highest death rate of any psychiatric disorder. They're very serious. They need to be taken seriously.

And anybody who might listen to this who may be struggling with some eating and body image issues or a spouse who suspects that perhaps their mate is, please understand that this isn't something that somebody brings upon themselves. It's something that they can get help for and heal from.

Scott: Deborah, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Deborah: Oh, you're so welcome. Thank you for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Miss Deborah Klinger and her practice, Deborah L. Klinger, M.A. LMFT PC, you can visit her website at DeborahKlinger.com or call 919-990-1143 for 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 previous episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

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