

Scott: Fight or Flight in Intimate Relationships. This is Stay Happily Married Episode number 289.

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. Do you have the skills to transform crises into connection in your relationship? Hollywood tends to portray marriages and relationships in such a harmonious way where communication, trust, and honesty are never an issue. However, we are all aware that relationships are never perfect and take quite a bit of work from both partners to be successful. Couples may have difficulties agreeing on the way to manage finances, raise children, or spend their free time. And in these times of disagreement things can get tense and uncomfortable for both people involved.

We all tend to deal with these problems in different ways. Some people may instinctively get defensive, while others may try to ignore the problem altogether. How do you turn these times of conflict into a way to connect with one another? Earning her doctoral degree in counseling and psychology at Temple University, Dr. Susan Orenstein is founder and director of Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Dr. Orenstein has devoted her professional career to helping individuals and couples improve their most intimate relationships. She specialized in relationship and couples issues. Dr. Orenstein is committed to providing state of the art practices in marital counseling and to that end continues to attend professional programs. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Susan: My pleasure being here, Scott.

Scott: Well, I'm not sure if it the topic of fight or flight is very well understood. Would you mind elaborating a little bit on this?

Susan: I'd be glad to. So the fight or flight pattern has been part of human survival and animal survival from the beginning of time. And what actually happens is that when animals perceive a threat in their environment, when they feel like they're in danger, nature has programmed them to either be ready to fight or to flee. And that's a protective mechanism to keep a species around. We may have heard of that. We may have learned about that in biology when we were in high school, but some people are really fascinated to discover that this fight or flight response happens in human beings today and not because we're afraid that a saber-toothed tiger is going to attack us. But because of emotional threats, an emotional sense of danger that we go right into that fight or flight, just like the animals do and just like we have been doing for survival.

Scott: What kind of problems do you see that couples are experiencing in the relationships that have to kind of revolve around this fight or flight idea?

Susan: One thing that I want to let people know is this is an automatic natural response. It's not intentional. People don't mean to fight, meaning attack their partner, or flight, meaning flee or abandon their partner. This is a natural response, but how this occurs in couples in their relationship is that there's some kind of conflict. There's some kind of stress, and it happens so, so quickly. They immediately go into this fight or flight where they feel that they are emotionally threatened. And they will start going either on the attack and becoming aggressive, or they will go into an avoidant mode and shut down and not be a meaningful participant in any kind of communication. So in couples you'll often see it can happen so quickly that couples almost seem like a caricature of themselves. I mean, something very, very minor can set this off, like somebody will not put mustard on a sandwich, literally. And in two seconds there can be attack from one partner or one partner shuts down. So what I do in our couples work when I work with couples is just help them to see this pattern because, like I said, it's a natural pattern. It's set up to be protective so that we don't get hurt, but it leads to so much difficulty, and people just don't really understand it and don't see it so they don't know how to respond to it.

Scott: Okay, you say it leads to so much difficulty. So what are some of the short and long-term negative effects that fight or flight behavior can actually have on the relationship?

Susan: Let me give an illustration so you'll know what a short-term effect would be. A woman wanted her husband to get a sandwich and go back and put mustard on it, and he came back to the table with the kids, and he had forgotten. And so she was immediately... This is actually a true story. So she was immediately triggered because she was feeling on the attack -- in her mind, and this happened so quickly. She was feeling, "He doesn't care about me. I'm not being protected in my marriage," all these kind of things. So she went on the attack and started berating him, "Why didn't you get me mustard? Why didn't you think of me? You're so selfish." And then he went into flight saying, "I can't handle this. I'm out. I'm going to take the kids and leave."

So for the short-term the reaction gets so exaggerated that couples can't just be in the moment and say, "Look, this is what I need. Let's be adults and think this through." And, Scott, what I didn't explain about fight or flight is that when we're in fight or flight it's a physiological response, and our bodies are geared up to fight or to flee. So we have increased heart rate, increased blood pressure. We have increased blood flow to our muscles so that we can be prepared to have a rapid response, either to attack or to flee. And what happens, what's missing is the blood supply and oxygen is not going to the brain. So our brains are very primitive. Our brains are very much into this extreme black or white, always never, and we actually just get dumb. We lose a lot of IQ points when we're in fight or flight, based on survival. So in the long-term when couples engage in this fight or flight over time, they're protecting themselves and they have self-

survival, but fight or flight does not help us with relationships. It doesn't help us with love. And so it's just not functional.

Scott: At what point do you see couples becoming aware that their instinct of fight or flight is causing damage, hurting the relationship?

Susan: Sometimes never. So what's interesting is couples will come into my office because they know their relationship is in danger, and they can tell us that there are communication problems. They can tell you their problems with sex, money, chores, in-laws, kids, but mostly -- I could say almost always what they don't recognize is that their pattern of communicating and their pattern of quickly reacting to each other is really what's at the root of their problem. Sometimes one partner can tell you -- what they can tell you. Oftentimes the husband or wife can identify the partner's half of the pattern. So they might be able to say, "Well, I don't know what happens, but he gets aggressive. He starts to blame me. He starts to bring up things from the past, or he might say, "Every time we get into this situation, she walks out of the room, and she won't discuss this anymore." But I think each person can easily see what their partner's doing, and it's much harder for them to recognize that they are also doing, in some form or fashion, some variation of fight or flight that they're doing as well.

Scott: What's a very natural occurrence you're stating for us, we're hard-wired for this. Are there any other patterns couples that are really affected by this problem as far as trends of age or marriage or family structure or anything like that you're noticing?

Susan: I'll say that there is a honeymoon period where this kind of goes underground, and people don't really see that unless the first six months or two years of a relationship when we have these extra endorphins and a high of falling in love. So generally when we're in a new relationship this is less likely to happen, but at the opposite when it's more likely to happen people are stressed. If you are chronically sleep-deprived like a new parent or if you have some kind of illness or a major transition, or if you were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder where your brain is actually wired to be more reactive, in all of these situations you are more vulnerable to fight or flight. And you'll be triggered quicker. This is triggered so, so quickly. I often hear people just don't know what happened to them. It's like they're hijacked by their brains. And all of a sudden they're screaming and it makes no sense, but it actually does make sense when people understand how fight or flight happens.

Scott: Okay, so you don't create a bunch of excuses for it. I'm going to go to my spouse after hearing this interview and say that the doctor said that this is very natural, that all the blood and oxygen does not reach my brain, and it dumbs me down. I can't be held accountable for this.

Susan: Right, right.

Scott: The wife is going to call you or the other spouse and say, “What is your solution to this problem?”

Susan: Great. I love what you’re saying because what is natural isn’t how we live in society. What is natural is that we eat with our hands and we would see animals kill it ... I’m just joking, but we socialize our children. We each pitch from an early age, say please, say thank you. This is how you are toilet trained. This is how you are considerate of other people; and so just because something is natural doesn’t mean that that’s what we need to do. So with understanding and with skills you can change this pattern. You can absolutely override this natural pattern, but it takes understanding and it takes practice. And I can tell you more about this as we go along, but this is not an excuse. This is an explanation.

Scott: Okay, great. What exactly are couples doing? What are they working on to help restore their relationship and get over this natural tendency?

Susan: In my practice I teach couples ways to put on the brakes, so to speak. As I said, this goes so quickly. So what they can do is they can learn to see when their partner is going into fight or flight, and they can learn how to make their partner feel safe and secure. And the metaphor that I like to use is that a new driver might make a dramatic course correction when they’re starting to skid off the road. I know. I have a 15-year-old son so I’m very aware of what it’s like to be in a car with a new driver, and there’s a quick reactivity, but as you learn, as you take driver’s Ed, as you get practice you understand that when you start to veer a little bit to the side of the road you just need a gentle, small shift with the steering wheel. And that’s exactly what I teach couples.

When you start to see yourself veering off the road or your partner veering off the road, don’t react but make a small course correction. Perhaps you put your hand on their shoulder and say, “I’m listening to you” or maybe you make some kind of joke that will help relieve the tension, or you could say, “I see that you’re upset, I really do want to understand you.” So there are definitely things that you can do as you learn your partner to help comfort them when you see that they’re feeling threatened. So that’s what I do in the practice, and it’s a fun work that we do in the office is I help couples learn how to comfort each other and turn this around and do the course correction so that they don’t veer off the road.

Scott: So a lot of it has to do with recognizing it in the other, does it not?

Susan: Bingo! And what we said before is you become dumb when you’re in fight of flight. You lose all those IQ points. And so when you can realize that you can say, “Okay, wait a minute. Let me reboot here. We’re going into this reactivity. We’re going a hundred miles an hour. Let me see what I can do differently. Let me see what signals I can learn to help comfort them.”

Scott: So you got couples in the office, and they're learning about fight or flight. And they're working on recognizing the signals, taking the steps to, I think you said, put on the brakes. When they apply these principles, what are some of the changes that you are seeing in the quality and interaction of the relationship?

Susan: People can feel much more secure in the relationship. I see a lot of times where couples, it's automatic that they see their partner going into fight or flight of becoming aggressive or shutting down, and they take that personally so they take the fight or flight as an attack. So then they retaliate and so often I'll hear a partner say that they get really mad because their partner was mad. But the change that I see is that they have a different lens for seeing this. So instead of the lens of feeling attacked, they can look at it from the other person's point of view, and they can say something to soften the experience and to reach out to the other person. So I see the tension go down dramatically in these couples when they learn about this pattern.

They don't take things as personally. They understand we're wired like this. I'm not going to hold it against my partner that they're being triggered. I'm going to try to comfort them. We're going to accept that this happens, and we're going to be compassionate towards each other about this instead of getting mad at each other about this. So I see a lot of more humor in the room. I see people laughing. I see people much more relaxed, and literally I see people sitting closer together on the couch in my office.

Scott: Well, Susan, for listeners who sought out this show and are listening to it and are saying, "Oh, wow, that is so neat." Or "That is so my spouse." Is there anything else that you think that those listeners should know?

Susan: I'd like the listeners to know that it's never too late to learn these relationship skills. We're not born with them. Nobody's born with these. You actually have to learn these skills by learning about our partner through the relationship. What makes them tick? What makes them feel scared? How do they need comfort? As we become attuned to our partner and really see them, their safety and their security that builds, that becomes a foundation to a healthy, terrific, lasting relationship. And I would love everybody to be in those kind of relationships, so my overall message is that these skills can be learned.

Scott: Absolutely. Well, Susan, thank you so much for talking with us today. It was very informative, very helpful, and we really appreciate you being on the show.

Susan: Thank you, Scott. It was my pleasure.

Scott: To find out more about Dr. Susan Orenstein and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.OrensteinSolutions.com or call 919-428-2766 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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