

Scott: Conflict in Relationships. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 291.

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 what it takes to overcome conflict in our relationship? Conflict is a part of everyday life. In literature we learn the different types of conflict which can be classified as man versus man, man versus nature, and man versus self. Although we are taught about the varying types of conflict at school, we aren't necessarily taught how to deal with conflict and resolve our issues. When we come across conflict in our relationships, it is important to have the skills to overcome the problems so that you can continue to have a healthy relationship. If we are unable to mend our issues with our spouse, there can be a variety of negative effects that can come about. What are some of the tools that we can use to overcome conflict in our relationships?

Earning her Master's degree from Northern Illinois University, Mrs. Shelly Hummel is the CEO of The Align Center for Couples in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Mrs. Hummel specializes in helping couples create stronger and more meaningful relationships. She is a Gottman certified therapist and has been in practice for 16 years. Mrs. Hummel facilitated an educational program for the state of Iowa for divorcing parents entitled, "Children In the Middle," as well as in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is a member of the North Carolina American Association of Marriage Therapists and a certified seven principles educator. She sees couples for weekly sessions or for intensives which are one to three days of intensive therapy for local or out of state couples in crisis. Welcome to the show, Shelly. I am so glad that you could join us today.

Shelly: Thank you for having me, Scott.

Scott: Well, what problems do you see that couples are experiencing in their relationships when it comes to conflict?

Shelly: Well, you know, Scott, couples usually don't come into the relationship with the proper skills of knowing what to do when there is an argument. We're not taught now to be good listeners and validate each other. We're taught to voice our side of things. This gets us into real trouble in our most important relationships. And not only that, couples are usually under the impression that happy couples don't fight. In fact, the marital research is pretty clear that all couples fight. Happy couples fight just as much and about the same things as unhappy couples do. It's just how they fight that matters.

Scott: Yeah. I'm sure research is pretty clear that all couples fight. I'd be worried about a couple that said they never did.

Shelly: That can cause more problems than not voicing your discontent.

Scott: I believe so. So what are some of the negative effects that this behavior can have on a relationship?

Shelly: Well, marital researcher, John Gottman, determined there are four things couples do during a fight or discussion. Four of them, to be precise, that leads them into an argument or makes an ongoing argument worse. The first is criticism, and let me explain what this is by using an example. Let's say that a woman is feeling like her husband is spending a lot of time at work, and they haven't been out on a date for a while. She's upset about this, and she's been having an internal dialogue with herself that work is more important than she is. So she decides to voice her concern, but she does it in a way that is critical. And let me explain what a criticism is. A criticism is attacking one's character rather than describing the situation you're upset about. So she might say something like, "All you do is work. Money is everything to you. You never take me anywhere." Well, this is her discontent voiced in a very critical manner. She is attacking his character that money is God to him and using global statements like, "All you ever do is work, and you never take me anywhere." A better way for her to get what she wants, which is more time with him, would be to approach it this way. "You know, honey, I'm upset that you've been working a lot, and I miss you. We're not spending enough time together, and I'm feeling lonely. I would really love it if you would plan a date for us Friday night." You see how different that second approach is.

Scott: sure.

Shelly: She still voices her complaint, but she does it in a way that she can be heard. And she gives him a recipe to succeed with her. She asks for what she needs; if the woman chooses to be critical, the likelihood that her husband is defensive skyrockets. You can imagine that he will defend his position if criticized rather than hearing the long that is underneath it. Defensiveness is very human, and we all do it when we feel attacked. The problem is that it isn't good for our relationships. Defending a position leads to invalidating our partner's complain because all we're focused on is giving our side of the story. The better thing to do instead of being defensive is to take responsibility. What the husband could do is say something like, "I know I've been working a lot, I agree. I want to take care of us in that way, but I hear you're a little lonely. And yeah, let's go out Friday night." Do you see how both partners have to be cognizant of how they say things in order for it all to go better?

Scott: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It sounds a lot better that way, and I can see that both of them had to help kind of steer the conversation or make the conversation go in a different direction. But you said there were four. So what's the third thing that couples do that makes things nasty?

Shelly: Yep. The third thing that couples do that escalates a fight is to be contemptuous of each other, and let me explain what contempt is. So contempt is viewing yourself as superior to your partner. It's putting them or their ideas down. This can be done very belligerently, such as being very sarcastic or actual name calling, or it can be done very subtly such as eye rolling. However it comes across, it is damaging to the relationship because you are

essentially saying that your partner is not worthy of respect. For example, a husband might be frustrated that his wife doesn't keep the house as clean as he would like it. So he walks in from work and instead of commenting on what she did get done during the day, he says something like, "Nice. Looks like the laundry better learn how to clean itself, because you can't seem to get it done. His sarcasm and contempt of her is just so destructive. He's basically communicating his discontent in a very disrespectful way, and interestingly contempt is the single biggest predictor of divorce that we have.

Scott: Wow, really? So that's amazing how people will talk to each other, In particular, one is consistently disrespectful. I can imagine it can have a devastating effect on the relationship.

Shelly: Yeah, it can and it will. Being contemptuous with each other erodes love, friendship, commitment, and trust. And these are the basic elements of a great relationship.

Scott: Yeah.

Shelly: The fourth and final thing that researchers have determined to be destructive is called stonewalling. This is when during a disagreement it feels like either of you are talking to a brick wall, or if you're the stone-waller; which 85% of the time a stone-waller is the man, you disengage from the conversation. So this is usually the result of too much intensity or too much criticism during this or previous argument. You can imagine if a wife feels her husband is disengaged and not emotionally responding to her, that can cause her to go ballistic which only leads to more stone-walling. And we know that the anecdote to stone-walling is learning to take a break during a fight. It is okay to take a break during a fight. It's okay, but the person requesting the break must not just walk away. They must tell their partner that they need a break, that this conversation and they are important to them, but they need to come back to the discussion at a different time when they've calmed down. And then do that, go ahead and take a break, leave the conversation, and come back to it when both of us are less reactive and have that discussion again, but this time do it in a different way.

Scott: I had to kind of chuckle when you said 85% of the time the stone-waller is the man because this bit of information could have helped me over the years as a man and my attempts to stonewall.

Shelly: Yep.

Scott: And not to communicate that I need to walk away, that I needed a break. But you just try to walk away and have someone pursue you when you're trying to stonewall them. It just kind of escalates things. I've experienced that, absolutely.

Shelly: Yeah, and you know, it's quite common that couples just beat the dead horse of a fight to death because they've been taught erroneously somewhere along the way that you never leave a fight, which we know is not true. It's okay to leave the fight. It's how you leave it and come back to is that matters.

Scott: Sure. Well, at what point do you see couples realizing that this is a problem in their relationship?

Shelly: So to be honest, they usually don't. They don't recognize that how they speak to one another and how they fight trickles down to every important level of their relationship. You know, couples come to me for a variety of concerns, but I do have to say that the vast majority of couples I see have one thing in common. And that's they don't feel connected anymore. Couples, they disconnect for a variety of reasons, and how they handle conflict contributes very significantly to how connected they feel.

Scott: Have you observed any trends in couples having conflict issues in the relationship?

Shelly: Yeah, absolutely. As the newness of a relationship wears off, individual differences and preferences come into play more and more conflicts emerge. Another perhaps more noticeable time is when kids arrive. The physical and emotional toll of having a child completely changes everything. The couple doesn't devote as much time and attention to the marriage, so when conflicts arise the goodwill and the friendship component of the relationship just isn't there to help cushion the fall of a major blowout. And not only that, differences in parenting styles is something I see that create a lot of conflict in couples. Remember it's not that they have differences, in this case, in the parenting style. It's not that they have differences that matter to the stability and happiness in their marriage; it's how they talk to each other about these differences that determines if it feels good or if it feels bad to be in the relationship. You know, I see this in step-families as well. Basically, any time there's a huge change in the family dynamic the chance for conflict will arise. But to be honest, the vast majority of conflict happens during the little daily moments of everydayness, and usually it's a fight about nothing. One of the partners will feel like the other looked at them wrong or spoke with them in a bad tone, and they're off and running.

Scott: Yeah. What do you suggest that these couples do to overcome their conflicts?

Shelly: Well, first know that conflict is not inherently bad. Second, listen to each other. So this is my number one piece of advice for all couples. If I could just teach one thing to improve your relationship it would be this. Postpone your own agenda and really listen to your partner. And again, postpone what you want to say and ask questions for clarification and really hone in on figuring out what it is they're looking for. It could be more time. It could be more help around the house. It could be a number of things. Let them say their piece and ask them what they need from you. One of the things that I teach people to do is to identify their core feeling about a certain issue and then share it with their spouse in a gentle way, a different way for their spouse to hear it, you know. Then I can help the other person listen without defensiveness. I help them break their patterns of negativity, which ultimately help them become more intimate and close.

Scott: Yeah. I really like that postpone your agenda and really listen because how many times have you been trying to get a point across to someone in your life, and you can tell they're not listening. They're actually rehearsing what they want to say to you. [laughs]

Shelly: Oh, absolutely. That is the hardest thing for couples to understand is that listening does not mean you're agreeing with them. Listening just means that you're giving them the space and time they need to voice their thoughts, their opinions, and their feelings.

Scott: How do these skills help them to get closer to each other?

Shelly: When both spouses are doing their part they get some movement on those issues that they've been having trouble with. And usually it's not the issue per se, that's causing the problem, it's that one or both of them aren't feeling understood or validated.

Scott: Okay. So when you've got some understanding and they're both doing their part in communicating better and listening better, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality of the interactions of their relationship?

Shelly: When I'm working with couples who genuinely want to work on their relationship and discover these new skills, it is life changing. They see that when they handle their conflict in a different way, it changes how close they feel to one another, and it affects their sex life. The conflict part is just a piece of the puzzle in helping them feel more connected but is one of the most significant.

Scott: Shelly, you've offered a lot of great information here today to us when it comes to handling our conflicts. Is there anything else that you think that our listeners should know that would really benefit them?

Scott: Yes. I would say the first thing is don't be afraid to seek professional help. You know, most of us we're not taught these skills, and it takes practice. Most couples wait an average of four years to see a couples' therapist when they first see that problems are arising. And if a couple waits too long to address issues resentments grow and it can be even harder to change the patterns. Also, know that conflict in a relationship does not necessarily mean that you picked the wrong person. You would have conflict with any person that you picked. No matter who you're with, there would be issues and conflict. There would still be disagreements. They would just be about different things.

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

Shelly: Thank you for having me, Scott. It's a pleasure talking with you.

Scott: To find out more about Shelly Hummel and her practice, The Align Center for Couples, you can visit their website at www.ShellyHummelTherapy.com or call 919-880-2566 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.

Announcer:

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