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Scott: Approaching Gridlocked Communication Patterns. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 295.

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 communication becoming an issue in your relationship? Communication seems to be an issue in any kind of setting these days. Whether it is communication at work, at home, or in a relationship, there are always problems with communicating with one another.

With the rise in technology and social media, communication is even more complicated than before. With texting, emailing, and chatting, messages get lost in translation, and it allows the recipient to analyze and interpret as they wish.

When it comes to couples, communication is a big part in having a successful relationship. It is important for each partner to convey their needs and wants with each other. It is also important for each partner to disclose their dislikes. When we can't communicate properly, our relationships with one another can suffer. What can we do to better communicate in our relationships?

Earning her master's degree in marriage and family therapy from East Carolina University, Jennifer Moynihan Wynn is founder and owner of Finding Balance, PLLC in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Jennifer completed an internship at ECU marriage and family therapy clinic in the day rehab program for brain injury survivors and their family members. She has an extensive background working in various mental health settings. She has experience doing group and individual therapy for mental health and substance abuse.

Jennifer has provided training for brain injury awareness in the community. She has also written articles for quarterly newsletter and provided resource support for survivors and their families.

Welcome to the show, Jennifer. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Jennifer: Thank you so much for having me, Scott. I really appreciate it.

Scott: Well, I can not remember an episode that we have ever recorded that communication has not come up as one of the primary issues in dealing with problems between couples. What problems do you see couples experiencing in their relationship when they can't get past that gridlocked communication pattern?

Jennifer: Oh, yes, I can imagine that you've had many shows with communication as a problem. Because I would say that many couples do cite communication problems as their primary reason for coming to therapy.

But, the difficulty that's often overlooked is listening and understanding. Most couples have perpetual problems in their relationship that continually resurface. The key, though, is to be able to find a way to talk about those problems without them causing more damage and emotional disconnection over time.

Because that's really the problem that comes over time, like when these communication difficulties continually arise and you're not able to effectively talk about them. Consequently, more often than not you end up with emotional disconnection rather than a lot of hostility. Of course, it does occasionally go the other way, but I would say in my experience many people who are feeling disconnected and lonely in their relationship, it's because of problems like this occurring.

They're not feeling heard. They're not feeling understood. They're not feeling loved by their partner because they can't really talk to each other. Many times in these kinds of communication traps that people find themselves in is that over time, you know, you don't really know how to express your needs effectively to your partner.

For example, if you're wanting to spend some time with your partner but he or she is always working. And, you over time start to think oh well they don't really want to spend time with me. Then, that might come out as a criticism. You might say something like, "You're always working late, you don't care about me and our family," rather than I miss you and would like to spend more time with you - which might be more effective and your partner might be able to hear that a little bit better.

If you talk to your partner the first way, your partner might get defensive and say something like, "Well you like food on the table, don't you?" Or, "Well, you're

always spending time at the gym whether I get home." That just ends up escalating communication rather than trying to facilitate communication and understanding between the two. Over time that just gets to be a big mess.

Scott: So, they continue down this path of saying you're always working late rather than I miss you. Left unresolved, what are some of the short and long term negative effects that this type of repetitive behavior can have on the relationship?

Jennifer: I would say in the short term it just makes people angry. It definitely escalates the conversation. Whereas if you were to say something along the lines... If your partner said something like you're always working late, you don't care about me, that understandably could create a very defensive feeling within you.

But, if you are able to kind of respond in a way that's like I understand that you're angry, I have been working a lot lately, just accepting a teeny tiny bit of responsibility, that kind of de-escalates the conversation. Rather than responding just with defensiveness that is essentially saying no, I'm not wrong, you're wrong, and then it escalates.

Also, on the first partner's side, if we're able to kind of work at bringing up conversations a little bit more gently... The big thing is that the first few seconds of a conversation predict the way that it's going to end. So, if you're starting the conversation very harshly it's more likely to end up very harshly.

I would say in the short term consequences are the conversation escalates, people don't feel heard, people don't feel understood, and then eventually they kind of disconnect. They put up a wall between them and their partner, and they just don't interact with their partner as much. They don't share with their partner as much, and they end up kind of being emotionally disconnected and lonely. It's very sad.

Scott: Yeah. I love what you said just now about that the conversations end how they are started. My best friend years ago gave me some priceless advice. He said that he rarely says the first thing that comes to his mind and almost never says the second thing.

Jennifer: Yes.

Scott: He says usually if I am patient enough to wait for the third thing to come then I have a much better conversation and less problems with people.

Jennifer: Oh, yes. That is absolutely right. Your friend has given some very good advice.

Scott: It's almost become a point of pop culture humor nowadays that men and women speak different languages...

Jennifer: Sure.

Scott: ...and we have a hard time communicating. But, at what point do you see that couples are actually becoming aware that this gridlocked pattern of communication we're talking about is hurting the relationship and it's not just your everyday difference between a man and a woman?

Jennifer: Oh, yeah. The difference between kind of situational problems that are just differences between a man and woman here and there, or woman-woman, man-man, whatever your relationship might look like, is that the perpetual gridlocked issues are the big, heavy issues that keep coming up and keep causing a lot of pain and hurt.

A lot of couples in these particular issues may feel betrayed by their partner. They may feel disrespected. They may feel hurt, frustrated. And, they might just feel like they're at their wits end, like no matter how many times they talk about it they just can't get anywhere.

It becomes like almost hopeless if it gets to that point. That's when you start to want to give up.

Scott: Do you see any trend or commonalities among couples that are having issues communicating with each other?

Jennifer: That's the thing. I think just people in relationships are... You're going to have communication problems. You kind of want your agenda. Your partner wants their agenda. I think there's not a lot of, in my opinion, trends with age or how long people have been together. I think it's just part of being human.

You know, you have emotions, and you're going to react on those emotions if you're not trained and you're not mindful on how to react. So, I think it's... Every couple has problems. The thing is that many people believe that if they have problems in their relationship, they disagree with their partner, that maybe they've chosen the wrong person, or that person's not right for them, or what have you.

But, the problem is that every relationship has problems. So, if you choose... There was one researcher who once said that when you marry someone or when you commit to somebody you're essentially choosing to live with a set of problems. So, if you chose somebody different you might have different problems, but it would be a totally new set of problems to deal with.

I think it really doesn't have any kind of discrimination of age, race, gender, identified gender, or anything like that. I mean we all have communication things. I think the key, though, is just being mindful of what you're feeling, what you're thinking, how you respond, and then also how your partner thinks and feels and responds.

Scott: Okay. Well, let's dive a little deeper into that, then, to be mindful about it. But, what else would you suggest that couples do to resolve their communication issues?

Jennifer: I would say one of the most helpful things is... You know, talking about mindfulness is being... And, when I say mindfulness, it's essentially the very simple term, a big, broad term. But, very simply it's just essentially having some awareness of what's going on within you on, like, a moment to moment basis. Being able to be aware of what are your triggers, what makes me feel a certain kind of way - if I'm feeling angry or if I'm going to get set off - and being able to take steps to prevent that.

Then, also kind of being aware of what sets off your partner and, on the flipside, what your partner likes. What does your partner appreciate? That is really helpful, and at least it's a very basic just knowing your partner that can set you up for more success in the long run. Because you're less likely to say things that are going to be hurtful. And, you're also more likely to be able to kind of manage your own emotional response.

My big thing is I think it's so... One of the most important skills that couples can have with each other is knowing how to validate your partner. When I say validate I don't mean that you have to agree with them. I don't mean that you have to do exactly what they're asking. You don't have to like their behavior.

But, it's essentially saying okay, I see your point. Or, I can see how you would see that from your perspective. Or, I know that you're angry. It's essentially saying like its okay to feel the way that you're feeling but not necessarily agree with it.

The only way to be able to really effectively validate is to be able to have your own emotions under control. It's really, really hard to hear and understand your partner if you are flooded and overwhelmed and are about to flip your lid, if that makes sense.

Scott: Sure. When you are working with a couple and you got them to start approaching this situation or their relationship with some awareness and some validation, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality in the interactions of that couple in their relationship?

Jennifer: Well, I will say again one of the reasons why I think validation is the most important thing that you can do in a relationship to make it better is because validation essentially says to your partner I hear you, I'm with you. It's not saying necessarily I agree with you but that I can sit and be here with you. I'm your partner.

What that does is it actually opens up communication. When you hear something like okay, I understand that, or wow, that must make you feel really angry, you're much more likely to continue to speak and to continue to share. You can feel safe with that person. Rather than if someone says something that's very invalidating, like that's silly, why would you think that.

For example, if one person says I'm feeling cold, and the other person says what are you talking about, it's 80 degrees, why would you feel cold. I mean that is very invalidating, and it doesn't necessarily help the situation.

But, if you were to say something along the lines like okay, would you like a blanket, it essentially makes your partner feel safe and makes your partner feel like

they can trust you. And, it helps them also trust themselves, rather than if you're going to say something like no, that's silly.

So, validation opens up communication. Validation helps people share much more. Validation increases intimacy, because you can feel safe with your partner to kind of disclose some of your more softer emotions. Because the only way that you can really share is if you're feeling safe. That's what validation can really help you do.

Validation also decreases emotional arousal. If you were to say... Going back to our first example, if the person were able to say something along the lines of yes, I understand, I really have been working a lot lately, I know that that must be frustrating for you, that person feels heard and they're less likely to try to attack back. Because they say okay, my partner heard me.

One more thing that it also really does is it aids in compromise. Because people are much more likely to be willing to compromise and to kind of let go if they're feeling heard. If they feel like their point is heard and understood they're much more likely to kind of give in to some compromise a little bit. So, it's just a really great communication tool all around.

Scott: Well, like I said at the beginning of the show, this is the number one primary topic that comes up. So, I know this is going to be a popular episode and a lot of people are going to listen to it, because a lot of people feel stuck in that gridlocked communication pattern. Kind of as a way of parting, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know that they might find helpful?

Jennifer: Yes, definitely. I think one of the things that's so helpful when you're listening to your partner and you're not really thrilled about what they're saying is to do something called the assumption of similarity. There was a researcher who wrote a book and suggested that if you find yourself attributing a positive trait to yourself, try to see some of that trait in your partner. If you find yourself attributing a negative trait to your partner, try to see some of this trait in yourself.

The reason why that's so important is it can kind of help slow it down so that not only you're not thinking that your partner's totally the bad guy, you're not thinking that you're totally right. You're able to see both negative and positive traits within you and your partner.

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

Jennifer: Thank you so much for inviting me. I've really appreciated this opportunity.

Scott: To find out more about Jennifer Moynihan Wynn and her practice, Finding Balance, PLLC, you can visit their website at www.findingbalancenc.com. Or, call (919) 926-8057 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: 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.

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Scott: Sure. When you are working with a couple and you got them to start approaching this situation or their relationship with some awareness and some validation, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality in the interactions of that couple in their relationship?

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I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

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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.