

Scott Blair: Repeating childhood rescue patterns in relationships. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 304.

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 Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you repeating the same behaviors in your relationship as you did as a child? Every parent has their own way of parenting; consequently every person's childhood is different from everyone else's. The way we are raised influences the way we do things later in life, whether it's our study habits, work ethic, or career choices. Some parents enforce studying and getting homework done before play. Later in life this can help you to focus more on education or getting your work done in a timely manner. What our parents instill in us at a young age often carries with us over the years. What happens when we come from a home that is less than optimal? Do we develop differently? Can our childhood affect the way we do things in our relationships? Earning her Master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania Miss Ricki Geiger is founder and owner of Ricki L. Geiger, LCSW, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Ricki is a licensed clinical social worker, certified group psychotherapist and certified retirement coach. She has over 30 years of professional experience. She provides individuals, couples, and group therapy for adults over 21 years of age. Ricki is a seasoned, engaging, and skilled community educator work workshop presenter. Welcome to the show, Ricki. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Ricki Geiger: It's my pleasure to be here, Scott.

Scott Blair: Well, I'm not sure if the topic of, let alone the idea of, childhood rescue patterns is very well known. So would you mind taking a minute and kind of elaborating for the listeners and for myself on what childhood rescue patterns are.

Ricki Geiger: Yeah, that's a great question. When we're adults, it's our responsibility to put our feelings and thoughts and adult needs into words. Unfortunately, most people have a terribly difficult time doing that, and because of their early experiences in families that also had trouble doing that and parents who did model that, people will act them out. They'll withdraw. They'll get passive. They may get aggressive, but you really don't know what they need and want. So when you have two people that have come from difficult family environments, they end up trying to unconsciously take care of the other person so they don't have to re-experience the wounds that they had growing up from their family of origin.

Scott Blair: What problems do you see that couples are actually experiencing inside the relationship when they repeat these rescue patterns?

Ricki Geiger: Right. So often what will happen is if people have parents that were less than optimal, you know, not very loving or caring, alcoholic, other kinds of addictive behaviors, gambling, anger, rage, withdrawing, neglect, just plain absence. You know, a child gets

wounded by that. They may withdraw. They may be aggressive. They may be angry. And so what happens when you have two people together is one person is trying to protect the other person. So they may not express their feelings, thoughts, and needs because they don't want to upset the other person because they know that that person had a difficult childhood. So the underlying wish by protecting your partner or spouse is that they're going to end up showing up to be this person that you never had. You never had the good mother, father, aunt, or uncle, whoever was the primary caregiver. So if you could take the optimal care of this person and be so loving to them that maybe, maybe, just maybe - it's a wish - that they will be loving with you and meet those needs that were never met when you were a kid.

Unfortunately, though, that never usually happens because when you end up rescuing somebody, after a while they don't like it because people don't like to be controlled. And they have their own immature emotional issues so they're not able to provide you what you really need, and you're not really healing their wounds because a person has to heal their own childhood wounds. It's very, very difficult and it's often very disappointing when you have to sit there and realize you've got to take care of yourself. And while other people are there to support you and love you, nobody can do that work for you. And so some of the problems in relationships I'd say particularly people who have been married for 20, 30 years who have developed a comfort with each other . . . Financially, they may own homes together. They have children together. People don't want to upset the apple cart, and they're very willing to compromise on a less than happy marriage. And they just suppress or try to ignore your needs. And so somebody will end up in my office who feels very lonely or isolated in the relationship, who just feels downtrodden, depressed, and just miserable and can no longer tolerate what used to be a comfortable relationship.

Scott Blair:

So those you're kind of describing are the effects of not identifying this issue or leaving it unresolved. I'm sure it's a difficult issue for people to discover without the help of therapy or counselors. What are some more, maybe, short and long-term effects that this behavior can have on the relationship?

Ricki Geiger:

Well, you know, if it's only one person who's coming into the office to deal with a couple problem, they're not going to get very far because these two people are in a dance together, and they're very comfortable with each other's steps. If one person begins to grow and change and want more from the relationship, it really can unravel the existing status quo. It can make your partner or spouse very angry. It can make them want to leave, or they may just do nothing and get very passive, or they may fight you. So it's really impossible to change relationships when only one person, you know, it's like playing baseball by yourself. You know, there's no one to play catch with. However, if two people can come into the office and both have an inclination to change, then that's much more promising. Even if people have resistances and fears, if you can get people to listen with each other which is different than hearing. Actually listening is putting your own needs and wants aside and hearing the other person from their own heart, thoughts, and feelings and taking them in for who they are and not what you want them to be.

Scott Blair: So do you think that, as far as the discovery of this issue goes, do most people . . . When do they become aware that this behavior is hurting their relationship? They show up at the office just saying, "Hey, we're in trouble and then you uncover that it's these childhood patterns or . . .

Ricki Geiger: Well, to be candid, there's a lot of variables. Sometimes one person will have an affair, and that will certainly bring the couple into the office because then there's the acting out, the tension that's gone on in the couple of these unexpressed, unresolved issues becomes so insurmountable somebody will do some acting out. So having an affair is one piece. And sometimes some people have some idea that they have communication problems, but then they get stuck in defensiveness, in feeling grandiose, in feeling it's not about them, it's all about the other person. So there's a whole continuum of awareness to unconscious defensive non-awareness.

Scott Blair: Have you observed any patterns? I know, we're discussing the probably traumatic childhood issues and things would be a common pattern.

Ricki Geiger: Yeah.

Scott Blair: But is there anything else you're noticing in these couples or individuals?

Ricki Geiger: Well, I think one of the biggest challenges that people have when they have trauma, and I do work primarily with long-term trauma, is that there's a real discrepancy between what the adult self may be. You may have a PhD scientist or a lawyer. These are very successful adults who have good careers, but have an internal undeveloped younger person who is totally separate and unintegrated from their adult self. So that becomes a difficulty to work with. Of course, I'm talking about couples . . . This is probably on the extreme end of the continuum. There are people that come in that really love each other, that really like each other, that have pretty good communication except there are a few things that go on that trigger old patterns. Somebody may be sensitive to criticism or a person may yell at the kids which then makes the other spouse upset because it reminded them of their parents. People get triggered by things all the time.

It's not so much that we do, as much as what we do with it when it happens. We're not perfect and things go on in life that are going to bring up past feelings, unexpressed, unfinished business with people that we've loved. And it's hard to contain all of that. So the biggest piece is to be able to, say, have a fight with your spouse or partner, and then have a mechanism of correction for repair. That is the biggest piece to any relationship's success. People are going to fight and have arguments, but you have to have a mechanism where two people can come back together, one person apologize or say, "Hey, I was in a bad place." Somebody has to be ready to sort of surrender to approach the other person so they can begin to talk about what happened. The problem can happen, of course, if neither person has the capacity to meet in the middle or to even take any responsibility for their behavior. I worked with one couple where one of the spouses is unable to say, "Yes, that was my fault." They are so wounded and it's so vulnerable for them. You have a certain amount of ego capacity. You know, like that little person that sits on your

shoulder that say, "Well, gee, Scott, why did you just do that?" or "I noticed you were so nice to so-and-so" or "You seem upset right now. What's going on?" You have to have an observing ego to notice your behavior to be able to say, "Yeah, I messed up right then. That was wrong of me to say that. That was out of place, and I'm sorry."

Scott Blair: So you're talking communication as, I guess, part of the solution to the problem obviously and a willingness. What else do you recommend? People who now have discovered this might be an issue for them and they have these unresolved patterns, what should they be doing?

Ricki Geiger: Well, therapy is always a great option because you're with a safe sort of anonymous person with whom you can share anything you want to and say whatever you want to and release all of those feelings and thoughts that you've been holding all these years. Some of them are pretty skewed. Some of them may be on target. There's also meditation. The key is for people to slow down, relax, take a breath, and pause. People don't want to push the pause button. When people get activated and upset, they just get themselves wired into a spiral of anger and acting out. It's very difficult to say, "You know what? I need to go in the other room for a few minutes and pause." And just let your nervous system calm down. So then you can allow yourself to feel whatever it is you're feeling. So awareness is really the key to a successful relationship. And some people get that by exercise. Some people just get that by looking at a tree. I don't think there has to be a prescribed way, but I do think it requires some stillness. And stillness is very difficult for people to do, especially in this technological tweeting age of immediate this and that. You have to want to, and it's scary for people to sit with their feelings. A lot of people say that they don't know what's going to come up.

They're afraid of being with their feelings by themselves, and it's about self-care. That's really the bottom line. It's about self-care, doing things that are going to enhance one's own self-esteem, whether it's hobbies, exercise, the new job, some creative artistic pursuit and learning how to set effective boundaries. Most dysfunctional families don't have effective boundaries. There's the gamut. There's the extreme of walls where a parent may say, "No, no, no, to the child all the time" or thwart their assertiveness or independence. To the other end where a parent may let the child do and say whatever they want whenever they want to, so then there's no boundaries. So one is aiming for assertive, permeable boundaries where you can protect yourself and say no, but you can also take in the environment in doses that are palatable and take in other people.

Scott Blair: So when somebody comes into therapy, let's talk about when they start paying attention, becoming aware, I think, are the words you used. They start becoming more active, more willing. They're learning to meditate or find ways to still their mind, become a little more artistic, work on themselves and breaking these patterns. When you get that flow going and that's starting to be accomplished, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and interactions, I guess, probably of their own personal life and the relationship?

Ricki Geiger: Well, for their own personal life they're much happier. They make the risk and ask their partner or spouse for something they need and want. They may bring up their dissatisfaction to whomever they're with. They may set better boundaries with this other person, and they may stop the old pattern of dysfunctional relating. And personally, their self-esteem improves because they're taking care of themselves by coming into therapy, by realizing that their needs and wants are not bad, and whatever happened to them in childhood was not their fault. That's very freeing for somebody to realize their parent may have done the best they could, but they failed them in certain ways. And how they are, whatever they learned, it's not their fault that their parent hit them or yelled at them or neglected them. So people, when they feel greater self-esteem, people have more confidence to go out in the world and live, live more fully. Try new things. Go swimming, go run, go join a group. Read a book, talk to other people. There are like minimal things, that they're the day-to-day things that help people feel a sense of belonging and purpose and meaning.

Scott Blair: Well, I think this topic definitely would need to be addressed by therapy. It's very interesting. It's very unique, but for somebody who might be listening to this show, and they might be thinking that me or my partner definitely is dealing with this type of issue. Is there anything else that you think they should know?

Ricki Geiger: That there is hope that they can change because most of the patterns that people live with, that they sort of compulsively repeat, are learned patterns from childhood. And because they're learned, they can be unlearned, and something else can take its place. And that's been my experience. People can change.

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

Ricki Geiger: It's been my pleasure, Scott. Thank you very much.

Scott Blair: To find out more about Ricki Geiger and her practice, Ricki L. Geiger, LCSW, you can visit their website at www.rickigeiger.com or call 919-929-8559 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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