

Scott: Can you say no to your spouse? This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 313.

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. Can you say no to your spouse? The term "no" may be universal in almost every language, but the decision of saying no can sometimes prove to be more difficult than it may seem. It is hard to say no to your boss when they give you a large project with an unrealistic timeline. It is also hard to say no to your young children when they pout and put on their sad little puppy eyes. It is hard to say no to your mother who needs help with something that she can't do by herself. And it is hard to say no to your spouse on something that you don't agree with when you don't want to make your loved one upset. What can we do to make saying no a little easier? How do we make boundaries with our loved ones without rocking the boat?

Earning her Masters Degree in Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania, Ms. Ricki Geiger is founder and owner of Rickie 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 and workshop presenter.

Scott: Welcome back to the show Ricki, I'm so glad you could join us again today.

Ricki: Me too, Scott. Nice to be here.

Scott: Ricki, you're here today to talk to us about boundaries and can you say no to your spouse. Will you tell us why this may be harder than some people think?

Ricki: Absolutely. Saying no to your spouse is often extremely difficult because people want to please their partner. And saying no would be a disruption as well, in the connection and possible intimacy that people have together. And the other piece is nobody wants to reject another person. And so people have confused saying no as an appropriate way to say, "maybe I'm not interested or something doesn't work for me" when rejecting the other person. And what happens then, is when you learn that your partner or spouse isn't receptive to you saying no, you then stop saying no. So I also just wanted to define a little bit about boundaries around saying no.

Scott: Okay.

Ricki: There is three major types of boundaries. The healthy boundaries are permeable, where people can say things to each other, take things in, let things out and know

where they end and the other person begins. Some other people have walls as boundaries, perhaps from childhood wounded-ness, fear of being hurt or rejected. They don't let anybody in, even somebody who may be very, very close to them. And then on the other extreme is somebody who has no boundaries. Who takes everything in that people say and reacts to that. And can also be very invasive and intrusive and say whatever they want to say to other people. So that's just to sort of set up the framework for our session today.

Scott: Okay. Well, what problems? Can you elaborate a little bit on that? That you would see couples experiencing when they're not able to set up these boundaries or tell their spouse no.

Ricki: The biggest problem people have is that when one isn't able to be honest. If you can't say no then you really can't say yes in an authentic way. People then develop resentment toward the other person. Because if you're afraid of hurting the other person's feelings and you want to protect them and or they can become very reactive whenever you set boundaries. It sets up difficulties because the other person doesn't want to feel separate and different and sort of at a loss for having to connect with somebody. So the biggest issue is resentment about not being able to be honest with your spouse or partner and feeling like, you know, you have to please them. And once you get into feeling like you have to please your partner, you move into enabling. You may forfeit your own needs and wants for the other person and that will set up a less than close relationship.

Scott: And if that goes unaddressed, then how does that really impact the relationship, short term and long term?

Ricki: Well, you know, many people are living this way. I work with people who haven't really spoken to each other honestly and openly for years and they've been married for decades. And you'll hear people say "oh, I never knew you felt that way." That's a very good outcome of people finally being open and communicating. Of course, there are a lot of people that just don't really talk to each other. They just exist day to day on the life maintenance issues. They go to work, they come home, they eat, TV and sleep, but don't really share their honest selves, so that's really sad. And then of course if you have children living in that environment, they become the role models for how to communicate. And that's not a very good way for children to learn how to express themselves.

Scott: Do you think the dominate part of this issue is that some people don't like the push back from their spouse when they tell them no? Or, do you think if the other spouse that can't handle being told no? What is more common?

Ricki: I think my experience has been mostly that the other spouse can't tolerate what they feel is being criticized. If you ask somebody, "Can you buy me this extra something?" or "Can you take care of my feelings?" They may not say it so directly. I think what happens is that people get into a co-dependent dynamic.

And so when one person says no, they really are asserting their autonomy. They may be saying more yes to themselves. "I'm going to go out tonight and be with my friends." Rather than, "No, I don't want to be with you." But if one of the spouses has emotional immaturity and hasn't developed a core sense itself, they'll feel very wounded by their partner or spouse being independent. They'll feel threatened and wounded by that and may do a variety of behaviors to sabotage their partner. They may yell at them, tell them what a bad spouse they are and how they're not meeting their needs. They'll blame them, they'll criticize them. Anything to shame them. So the assertive partner who has said no will possibly relent to that person's desires.

Scott: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. At what point and time do you see that couples are becoming aware that they lack these boundaries in a relationship? Or one of them doesn't like to hear no, or the other one doesn't like to tell them no.

Ricki: Well it is true that people don't like to tell the other person no as well. But you know anybody that comes into my office has already had some awareness about these issues. And then it becomes, you know, either very positive that both people want to look at their family of origin issues, where you could have had a parent that was extremely critical and said no all the time and how wounding that sounds. That's the best case scenario and people are already willing to look at these issues. Of course, then some people get very afraid and threatened by the possibility of needing to change and some people can't really change, which is very sad. They don't have the ego strength to tolerate looking at themselves objectively both their good qualities and also the things that may interfere with a healthy relationship.

Scott: One of the things you just pointed out was that this might stem from like an over critical parent. Have you observed any other trends among the individuals or even the couples that are having this boundary issue?

Ricki: Well, you know, not many people are taught how to have healthy boundaries. And so it could be both a critical parent, it could be a neglectful parent. There's a huge gamut of different kinds of traumatic experiences people have, that keep them either isolated, overly involved in somebody else's life, expecting the other person to meet their needs all the time, wanting to be taken care of, having a difficult time being separate. I mean there is so many complex issues. The problem happens if one person is in therapy and doing their work and beginning to grow and feel better about who they are so they are able to say both yes and no, and the other person isn't growing. That can really be a conflict, because then it becomes like this dance they used to have where they knew how this other person was going to move. Now one partner has changed their steps, so the partner now has to deal with this changed person, which makes them either rage more at them. "How can you change on me? I thought things were just fine. Don't you love me the way you are? The way I am?" Or they can begin to join

them. And sometimes people leave and make up all sorts of excuses why they are leaving.

Scott: Well, what do you suggest for couples do to kind of once they've identified this issue to re-establish boundaries together in a relationship?

Ricki: Well, it's really important that both people can own some of their own family of origin of issues. Like to know what your vulnerabilities are. "When you say this to me, it reminds me of my father and it would be better for me if you could say it like this, then I wouldn't feel so hurt and rejected." So for people to get to know themselves and to know what they can tolerate and what they need to tweak. Hearing communication from the other person and being able to listen to each other, that's a hard one. Because when we listen to each other, we're not just hearing what the other person says, we're hearing them as a separate person. And being able to tolerate this person that you've lived with for a long time or even newly connected with as a separate person, who has different thoughts and feelings from yours is very hard for some people. Because they may have grown up in a family where there wasn't separateness. There was a lot of enmeshment between the parents and with the kids. Kids may not have been allowed to assert their autonomy and be separate people. They may have had to obey their parent's rules in order to get any kind of gratification from them.

Scott: So, yeah, absolutely. So with couples kind of taking ownership of their part and this miscommunication if you will. And they're being honest and they're open and they are listening like you suggested to each other's boundaries. Once you get them going down that road, what are some of the changes you're seeing? And the quality and the interaction of their relationships?

Ricki: Well, they are able to talk to each other in an honest way. That provides this mechanism of correction when there's a problem. So when there's a problem with each other then or something gets on each other's nerves it doesn't become an explosive issue or something that separates them. They can sit down and say, "You know when you said this, it really felt like this to me. And it made me react like that." So that's an adult healthy communication. It brings people a lot closer, they have more trust together, they have more fun together. There's more of a we, a healthy we, in the relationship. And people are then able to tolerate being close and having greater intimacy and also being separate. Cause people have separate interests. One person loves to square dance while the other person likes to play polka.

Scott: Sure.

Ricki: So, that's just a great foundation for a healthy dynamic between people.

Scott: Well if someone listening to this show and this is kind of new to them, but they realize that maybe they're struggling with being able to tell their spouse no. Is there anything else that you think they should know?

Ricki: Yeah, that there's something called the bill of assertive rights. And the number one on that bill is you have the right to change your mind. And that also means you have the right to say yes. And you have the right to say no. It's not, you know, the word right is especially important because it is your right to share your authentic feelings with somebody. And you know sometimes if it's just hard to say no, somebody could say "That doesn't work for me because such and such." If somebody is afraid to come right out and say, "no, I don't want to go to that, or that doesn't sound like a place I want a vacation." They could word it in a softer way. "That doesn't work for me because . . ." And that might be a way to communicate more assertively without feeling like you're just rejecting or saying no to this other person.

Ricki: Because saying no . . .

Scott: Sure.

Ricki: Is really a way to connect with somebody. It's not a way to push them away. People misinterpret that. That if you say no, that you are rejecting the other person and that really isn't true. It takes courage to say no, but you're really wanting a more authentic way of relating not just adapting and happy to please. If you feel like you're trying to please another person, then it's time to step back and wonder whether this is really a healthy relationship.

Scott: That's a really powerful point. Ricki, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Ricki: It was my pleasure, Scott, as always.

Scott: 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 will 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.