

Announcer: Are you having trouble with communication? This is Stay Happily Married episode number 315.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married. Your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice on how to build happy and healthy marriage.

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you having trouble with communication? We all know that better communication leads to better relationships in all aspects of life. We have to learn how to communicate well with our bosses and co-workers at work. We do this so everything can run smoothly and efficiently. We have to learn to communicate effectively in school so that we don't fall behind or misunderstand an important lesson. We have learn how to communicate with our friends to that plans and events go the way they need to. In relationships with our loved ones, we know that we have to communicate our wants, needs, and feelings to achieve a fulfilled relationship. If we know this then why is still so hard? What are some of the things we can work on to better communicate with our loved ones and to make our relationships thrive?

Earning his master's degree in counseling psychology from Towson State University and his education specialist degree in marriage and family therapy from Seton Hall University, Jeffrey Brandler is owner and founder of Jeffrey Brandler, **EdS CAS SAP** in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey. He has had a private practice since 1991, working with individuals and couples working with the most common treated issues, being anxiety, depression, addiction, and stress. Jeff is a licensed marriage and family therapist, certified addiction specialist, and substance abuse professional as well as a chapter advisor for the Depression Bipolar Support Alliance. He has been published by the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy New Jersey twice in his career. Jeff is also a presenter at self help corporations and professional groups. Welcome to the show Jeff, I'm so glad you could join us today.

Jeffrey: Pleasure to be here.

Scott: Jeff you are here today to talk about couples' communication. In all the interviews I do, that's probably the most common thread that comes up is this issue of communication. So what problems do you see couples experiencing in the relationship when they lack communication skills.

Jeffrey: When couples lack communication skills, what happens is that there's lots of conflict. Because there is lots of conflict there is also a very little conflict resolution. So the couples will go and they'll have a fight about literally anything and that can go back and forth like a ping pong match. And with some couples that escalates, some cases it becomes violent, and in some cases it just becomes two people who are running parallel lives and they're not getting along and the marriage starts to fall apart.

Scott: If it's never addressed and they don't acquire any real communication skills, what are some of the short and long term negative effects that this lack of communication can actually have in relationships?

Jeffrey: If the issues are never addressed what happens is the couple gets further and further apart. In my office what happens is that I see couples where there has been infidelity because partner A or partner B is not getting their needs met. They find person C who is more

than happy to meet their needs. On another hand I also see people who just get very much into themselves and they start becoming self-absorbed and use alcohol, use drugs, use other addictive behaviors because they just escape and numb out the issues. The same people also if they're not using alcohol or drugs, they can become depressed. And again they're back into themselves. You just end up with some pretty unhappy people with not the best coping skills and in many of these cases they end up in divorce.

Scott: It is a very common thing that we have an issue with men and women in communications in our relationships. What point do you see that couples are actually becoming aware that they are having this issue, that they lack efficient communication and it's hurting the relationship?

Jeffrey: They tend to become aware of it when one person says something's up with our relationship, let's go and fix it. And oftentimes the other partner will say no things are just great. But if the one person pushes hard enough eventually they end up doing something about it. And that something may not be going for couples counseling. Something might be let's read a book, let's get a workbook, let's go to a class, let's talk to our clergy. They may do a bunch of things before they ever step into a counselor's office.

Scott: Have you observed any trends among people that are struggling with this issue of communication?

Jeffrey: The major trend that tends to happen is that when stressors kick in, that's when the relationship starts to change. The classic is when the two person relationship becomes a third person because they had a child. That's when things start to pull apart and the stress starts to kick in. That's the major trend that I've noticed. The other trend would be the proverbial seven year itch scenario which is almost a stereotype, but it happens. One other thing to note, which I say anecdotally in my office all the time, is that couples come to counseling about three years after they should have come in the first place. Three is not etched in stone as a number but it sure seems that way. If they come in 2014, they started having problems in 2011.

Scott: What do you suggest that couples do to address this communication issue or alleviate it, especially when you're saying predominantly, it's one person who starts realizing that they're having this issue before the other?

Jeffrey: One person may come in the office and want an appointment, so we do that. Ultimately that might lead to the second person coming in because the scout proves that I don't bite and therapy is okay and they come in for a couple sessions. That tends to work out because once both parties come into the office it just seems that now they have fighting chance about what's going on as opposed to them not talking about what's going on.

Scott: What are some of the specific items that you may have talk about or start working on to help avoid or resolve some of those negative issues that you said may pop up earlier.

Jeffrey: One of the first things I get them to do in my office is talk to one another which sounds pretty obvious, but isn't. I want to help them to learn to communicate better. I want to give them some tools to work with. For example, I might use "I" statements. Which is "I" feel, "I" think. Rather than talk about you, which in everybody's house is a fighting word. I want to talk about "I", how I'm feeling, how I'm doing. I like to talk about people talking in smaller doses. One of my ongoing jokes with couples is that I have an

unpublished book entitled "15 Words or Less". Hopefully they get the joke and recognize that the book is 15 words or less. That to me is a great way of helping people to have a format to work with. I'm feeling really frustrated about last night's dinner. I really didn't mean to yell, I'm sorry gets an awful lot accomplished in 15 words or less as opposed to going on and on. As many people go to and just continue to talk on and on endlessly and the other partner clicks off. The one thing I want them to do is to begin to talk. That's one of the key things.

Another thing I want people to do if they talk is to be able to listen. They have to be able to acknowledge and to validate and to pay attention and acknowledge what they hear because most times couples don't hear one another very well at all. Partner A will talk and partner B will say so you're talking about this? And the person will say they're not talking about that at all. They don't hear one another. We have to practice. I get couples to practice talking and listening. They also need to practice talking, listening, and acknowledging things that happen in the marriage. It was great that you made dinner last night for me, thank you. It was great that you helped me with the garbage, I really needed that help. Couples are poor at acknowledgement. They are great at criticism. They are poor at acknowledgment. Those are some of the things that I like to do with people to get them talking and teach them some skills and have them practice. To help them practice conflict resolution and negotiation. Many people think about compromise. I think compromise is a bad thing. If I want chocolate ice cream and you want vanilla ice cream. A compromise many gets us a twist or strawberry. That doesn't work for me. I want three days of chocolate, three days vanilla, and one day we do something else. Maybe we don't have ice cream at all. That's a negotiation. Couples most times have no idea how to negotiate. They know how to have conflict but not negotiate.

Scott: I like that, negotiating over compromise.

Jeffrey: Because you want the win/win. You don't want the win/lose.

Scott: With couples approaching negotiation this new way by getting them talking, they're starting to use their listening skills. They're starting to negotiate better, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and interaction of their relationship?

Jeffrey: Once they start talking in a different way, then they can start talking about the problems. They can start to talk about how they got to the problem in the first place. They are able to acknowledge, if it's not so hostile and not so conflicted, they're able to acknowledge what "I" did. It's easy for me to blame you. You did this, you did that. When the conflicts down, I can take responsibility for my actions and look at how I might have affected this. Then I can acknowledge and apologize about what's going on. In situations where there has been big ticket items, we can work towards forgiveness because at least we can have conversation about it. You can't forgive someone for doing something, whatever that something is, if you can't communicate about it.

Scott: What do you think is the biggest challenge that you see with couples when it comes to communication. Is it the baggage we bring in, like what we've learned from our parents and our upbringing? Is it just the way men and women are wired differently, extroverts or introverts? Is there one big challenge? Lack of communication skills? What would you say the number one thing is?

Jeffrey: I would say the biggest challenge is a lack of knowing how to communicate. That if I saw bad communication growing up, I didn't learn it there. If you watch TV and see reality TV we have no idea how to communicate. We have Twitter which is great. I can tell you an awful lot of things in 140 characters, which is good for 15 words or less, but that's as far as it goes. Where is intimacy and where is connectedness. If you continue to have communication, you ultimately have intimacy. In order to have intimacy, you have to have risk.

Scott: Jeff you brought out some really good points today and it's a pretty broad topic. Do you think there is anything else our listeners should know?

Jeffrey: The one thing I think listeners should know is that my website is Change is Possible. I joke with people that it's not just a great marketing slogan. It's true, change is possible. A person just needs to have the courage to contact their local office or some therapist in their neighborhood. Someone who is going to understand. Someone that has the right credentials to understand how to do couples therapy. Once you take the risk to pick up the phone that weighs 10,000 pounds and say I want to make an appointment. I want to talk to someone about what going on in my marriage. Whether you go by yourself, or whether you go with your spouse or partner, it doesn't matter. Take the risk, pick up the phone, make the call, and show up. Then you start to making changes and feel better and increase the quality of your life and the quality of your relationship.

Scott: That's some really great advice. Jeff, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. To find out more about Jeffrey Brandler and his practice Jeffrey M. Brandler EDSCASSAP, you can visit their website at www.changeispossible.org or you can call (973) 402-2647 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I'll 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 and until next time, stay happily married.

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