

EPISODE 226**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:03.0] PF: Welcome to Episode 226 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us. If you think that conflict is always bad for your relationship, think again. Today we're talking with CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke, who are life partners, therapists, and authors of the new book, *The Beauty of Conflict for Couples*. They've helped hundreds of couples reconcile their differences and get their relationships back on track.

But they say it's not about romance. Instead, they teach couples that the things we argue about often have the potential to pave the way to greater intimacy if we learn how to use it properly. They sat down with me to explain more about how we can all learn to deal with conflict in a relationship and use it to build a stronger, healthier bond.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:45.6] PF: Well, Susan and CrisMarie, welcome to the show. This is gonna be a lot of fun. I'm really excited to talk to you today.

[0:00:52.6] SC: Yeah, we're excited to be here, so looking forward to it.

[0:00:56.6] PF: Well, this is this book is really upending some long held beliefs about relationships. So I wanted to know, first of all, how you came to write this book.

[0:01:07.6] CC: That is a good question. This is CrisMarie. We have been in relationship, we've worked and been life partners for 20 years, and when I first met Susan, she was. I saw her deal with a bully in a group setting and I was just like, "I want to learn," — she did it in a way that really worked and I came from a background where, oh my gosh, my dad was very angry and so I was always, my job was to make everything smooth and the way I saw Susan show up with energy but effectiveness I thought, "This is really cool. I want to learn how to do this." And it really transformed the dynamics of that situation.

[0:01:48.6] SC: And this is Susan. I think, you know, in that moment I think what I learned over the years, initially because of my own health challenges and then later because I became a marriage and family therapist, was that if there's a way when tensions are high and differences are being expressed to hang in and make contact with the other person and see beyond the story that's getting presented, that kind of connection is very profound and people are longing for it and we've lost sometimes the recognition that to get to that place you have to go through kind of you have to go through the fire a little bit.

[0:02:25.6] CC: The messy.

[0:02:26.6] SC: The messy, but the result is incredibly rewarding, so.

[0:02:31.6] PF: What really is interesting is we all have this pretty universal belief that what makes a relationship last is being able to keep the romance alive. So when you say that the key to a lasting relationship is conflict, it's like, "Wait a minute." So can you tell us more about that? How does conflict actually benefit our relationship?

[0:02:54.6] CC: Well, this is CrisMarie, and like I was saying, you know, I grew up with an army colonel dad that was angry all the time. So every night at dinner was like running the gauntlet, hoping he wouldn't explode and I'd try to keep the peace or change the subject. So I wound up really becoming somebody who was a pleaser and an achiever and then when I got into relationship with Susan, what was so powerful is she really wanted to hear my point of view.

We'd run into conflict and I'd be like, "We're over, it's done," you know? Over and over again. And she would say, "I really want to hear from you." I'd be like, "Well, I'm scared right now," and wound up happening when I started to trust, "Wait a minute, I can really have a different point of view," and we would engage. We would come up with something that wasn't my way or her way. It was something new that had emerged and that this happens in brain science, too. We come up with those eureka moments when our brain is holding two paradoxical ideas that can't reconcile and boom! New neural pathways were formed with a creative idea.

That was my felt sense over and over with Susan and then we started working — So in our relationship, we started working with business teams, we saw the same thing happen and then

when we started working with couples, of course the same thing happened. It was pretty powerful.

[0:04:11.6] PF: But how to keep the relationship going?

[0:04:14.6] CC: Well, I guess what I was realizing — I didn't really end that piece because I think for me I became more and more alive because I'm sharing more. More of me is in the relationship, so I feel really, rather than like, "Oh, I better you know, I better pick my battles. I better not bring this one up." I was at actually saying, "You know, I'm unhappy with this," or whatever the situation was. So I felt more empowered and alive, which made our romance more alive — energy, the energy in the relationship that that makes sense.

[0:04:47.6] SC: We talk about this in the book that there are three primary things that need to be — this is Susan's speaking — that you need to pay attention to in any kind of relationship that are important. One is me, myself. You know, I gotta know myself. I also need to be very aware of the impact I'm having on the other and aware of, we call this the "we". You know, what's going on between us? And I also need to be aware of the context and what happens is we have developed strategies from childhood for all sorts of reasons, where we tend to be uncomfortable with uncertainty and attention, and we opt out of one of those three areas. We stop paying attention to it.

We either ignore ourselves, and that's what CrisMarie was talking about, or we actually only pay attention to ourselves is kind of that's more the superstar style, where it's like, "I'm going do it my way. Later people will thank me, but I'm not that aware of the impact I'm having." Or were very super reasonable people who are very rational. But we're not actually that aware either of ourselves or the human dynamic or the other people involved. And so when those three things, though, have some equal attention in time, that's what leads to congruence. Like the inside matches the outside, and that is something that is very appealing and what can help create more intimacy in a relationship.

We think it's gonna be the high charge sex that keeps relationships lasting longer, or maybe the lust of romance and all of that. But we actually think that has a lot more to do with dopamine and drugs than it does anything that's sustainable. And it's not until you get to this place of intimacy, which is one way we define is "into me see", is that you know where you have that vulnerability

and curiosity that's actually what makes it sustaining may not have quite the same sex life. You have to work on that a little bit to keep it alive. But you have a much deeper, richer, fulfilling relationship.

[0:06:41.6] PF: Well, when you do have conflict, how do you use it in a healthy way? Because we've all seen couples that have a lot of conflict, and it's it's not good for them. So how is it that if you have you're in a relationship and there is conflict, how do you use that positively?

[0:06:57.6] CC: Well, I think we talk about, and we talk about this in the book. We talked about two magic ingredients that really helped transform those, you know, those habitual fights that you have, where you bring something up, your partner reacts and you counter react and then decide, "I'm never gonna bring that up again," you know? That's the pattern of the unhealthy conflict. But if we talk about being vulnerable and being curious, and if I can actually rather than saying, "Susan, it's your fault. Like why do you keep your socks on the floor all the time?" Or whatever the problem is, if I can talk about myself like, "I realize," and this is a vulnerable move. "I realize I'm uncomfortable. It depresses me to see your socks on the floor, or whatever it is. I feel like I'm the one that always has to clean up after both of us." That's me being vulnerable and saying what's happening inside.

And then I could even get curious about what's going on for you, and this is a small one, but what's going on for you, that you always leave your socks on the floor? Or even how is it for you that I'm even bringing this up to talk about? So being curious about the other person, those two ingredients really help transform kind of that habitual "here we go again" sort of conflict. It really changes that dynamic.

[0:08:11.6] PF: So then, does it take situations like that if you have something that you're constantly fighting over or disagreeing over, can that actually get removed because the other person understands what it means to you?

[0:08:123.6] SC: Well, that's a big part of it. This is Susan speaking. Like if I show up with vulnerability and curiosity, the other question I can ask when I get to that place is if we still are at odds with each other this probably wouldn't happen with the socks, but it might. But if it's something that's a little more, yeah —

[0:08:38.6] CC: Money.

[0:08:39.6] SC: Money or a little more hot, or sex or something, if I could go beneath that and say, “Listen, I am really interested in why this is so important to you.” Like as if instead of just staying in my position, I can get myself to the point where I could be interested. “Wow, you have a whole different perspective on this than me, you want something different,” and if I don't fight about that, but go underneath it, why is it important to you? And we keep exploring that, usually that's where they're begins to be some empathy, some understanding, and we can begin to create. You know, it's not like we compromise. We actually create new and different ideas based upon more information.

[0:09:17.6] SC: Because too often couples are trying to solve whether it's money or any of these hot topics. They're trying to solve the problem at the top level, “Do we save, do we spend?” and often, especially money, can be quite charged. You know, we have family influences. There's a lot that's going on, ego stuff, and if you can slow down and take the time and we talk about this tool, that's very effective when couples are approaching a hot topic and we talk about, it's called a 5-5-5 and it's a boundary communication experience where let's say it is money. You take the — one person takes the first five minutes and they talk about it, and five minutes can sound like a long time for somebody.

For me, it's like it's perfect cause I know I'm not gonna get interrupted, I can — It doesn't mean I have to talk the whole time. I could take a breath and think about what I want to say, but I get to kind of bring up all sorts of stuff that's underneath saving or spending for me. And then the second five minutes, like Susan would get to talk uninterrupted and I would listen and then the third five minutes, that's when we have a dialogue and at the end of the five minutes we would end and stop. So that's the 5-5-5. I see Susan's —

[0:10:26.6] SC: I'm chuckling because you know that key here is not to make it 5-5-45. Because that's often what happens.

[0:10:36.6] PF: I was gonna ask about that. Like, how do you hold that to five minutes?

[0:10:39.6] CC: We actually use a timer. We suggest couples use a timer. sees a

[0:10:42.6] SC: Yes and then after you've had that, it doesn't mean you're gonna get to resolutions. We're such a culture that wants everything resolved. But if we can build up our tolerance for that need to have resolution, we can actually begin to explore the opportunity for more creative options. And so we often encourage couples, you know, really need to solve this right away. Most things are not life and death. And so if you take the time to do a 5-5-5, then do something else to kind of maybe tap your goodwill with each other and sometimes you just need to take a break because it has gotten messy. But come back and do a 5-5-5 at another time.

You begin to develop that resilience to hold the tension of not just having an answer, and that's that's a pretty important thing because most of us don't like to hangout in uncertainty. But that's exactly what we need to develop if we actually want to become more conscious, more evolved, and tap into a greater sense of wellbeing.

[0:11:41.6] CC: And more creativity and innovation. Yeah, you'll come up with different solutions to the same problem.

[0:11:46.6] PF: Well what happens if you're in a relationship with someone who has to win? You know, we've all been — we know those people who they actually like getting into a fight because it's a chance to win. So how does that apply?

[0:12:00.6] SC: Okay, well, I what the first thing out, I would suggest is instead of arguing about that, I would be kind of curious. Like one, do they recognize that that's my interpretation, that they really have an investment in winning? Now, if they actually do get that, that's the pattern then the simple thing I would then explore is so why is it so important for you to win? Because that's a what's going on. What's — and usually, though I think what stalls is actually you bring that up in a relationship and the other person says, "That's not true. I don't always want to win."

[0:12:33.6] PF: And then you start bringing up examples.

[0:12:35.6] SC: Yes, and then it's like, "Wow. Okay, I guess you have a very different perspective." So that's where it's a little — it's actually harder if the person doesn't think they're doing that. And a lot of times, you know, my experience as a marriage and family therapist, talking to people about that, it really is true. The person isn't doing it as much. They're both doing it, and they both have a need to win. It's very rare that I project out on to, I mean, I have

done it with CrisMarie. You just want to win and nine times out of 10 I'm as invested in that as she is. So, but that's a hard place that turning 180 seeing my own participation in it is hard to do so. That's the thing that I would encourage people to do first.

[0:13:17.6] CC: The key is owning, like, "My story is that you want win. Tell me, do you agree with that or disagree?" So it's really about creating more dialogue even around that point than a rightness or wrongness. If that makes sense, Paula?

[0:13:31.6] PF: Yeah, it absolutely does. And then another type, and CrisMarie might be more familiar with this because her dad sounds a lot like mine. Someone who they breed a lot of conflict. And so if say, I'm in a partnership or relationship with that person, how I'm going to be afraid to bring these things up. So how do you do it, then? How do you handle conflict if that person is tends to breed a lot of conflict?

[0:13:58.6] CC: Well, yeah, with my dad that would be a scary scenario. I'd probably say, if I was afraid Susan was going get mad at me or yell or, you know, get really reactive.

[0:14:07.6] SC: You do think that a lot. So I mean, I do. I'm probably am not as hot tempered, but I do, you know, have a passionate style. Which you do, you have struggled with. So carry on.

[0:14:18.6] CC: So often I'll say, "Hey, I have something that I want to bring up.

[0:14:22.6] SC: This was like a demonstration. We got to see it in action.

[0:14:24.6] CC: And I would say, you know, "I'm worried about how you're going to react. So I feel vulnerable, and that's still important. I still want to bring it up.

[0:14:34.6] SC: It really does for me. This is you know my experiences when why I tend to be so hot wired sometimes is I am quick to react when I think I'm being blamed and I tend to get defensive. And I hear this a lot when I'm working with Couples that that's the other side of that equation. And now whether that makes sense or not is not really helpful. But when CrisMarie actually tells me how it's impacting her, versus her telling me, "You're getting too angry and too

loud, it's not safe," that that to me, is all about me. And in my opinion, I actually feel pretty safe. So I don't really know that I'm, you know, becoming the monster, whatever.

So, but if she just says, "Look, I realize I don't know whether you're intending to be this angry or not, but I am really scared. I am scared of what's gonna happen next." I get interested in that. If it's thrown at me like it's my fault, though, I tend to get much more defensive and it just gets worse. I mean, hopefully I've evolved a little bit and still have learned how to not get trapped in that one, but so it does work for me, and I think if there's a situation where there's been violence, physical violence, and this is really the hardest part. Most people have velcroed anger to violence, and those are two. They're not the same thing.

Violence is the crossing of boundaries without permission. There's a lot of you know, a lot of times I never say to someone When you raise your voice like that, I'd get incredibly uncomfortable and don't feel safe. That would be a boundaries statement about it. Someone raising their voice, though, isn't necessarily — like if no one's ever said anything. And that's not necessarily violence. And so the key is to be able to unravel it and recognize and have that discussion with this person who supposedly loves and cares about you. Now if that person isn't even interested in that then I would begin to look at, is this the person I want to be in relationship with?

[0:16:24.6] CC: I mean, we talk about this in the book. We talk about how to deal with your anger, had to deal with the partner's anger and even how to come forward, which is the learning for me is how to come forward and talk about myself and say, "I'm a comfortable," or, "I'm scared," or, "This is what I want. This is what I don't want." Versus I tend to look outward and think, "No, Susan, you need to do this or I don't want you to do this," you know? So that's why it comes across her feeling so blame, because I'm talking about her rather than talking about me, and that sounds like such a little thing. But it makes all the difference when I can talk about myself and what I want and don't want versus talk about what she's doing wrong.

[0:17:01.6] PF: And this seems like something that someone who's listening could employ this without even the partner being on board. Like I don't have sit down and make sure that the other person knows, "Here's our new grandpa rules." This is something you can start using.

[0:17:16.6] SC: Yes, this is Susan. That's so much — that's so true. Often we teach a lot of — in working with couples, we work a lot with what we refer to as a communication model and things they could try. But the reality of it is nothing is dependent upon the other person being different. It's dependent upon me using these tools to become more aware of myself and show up differently. And so that in and of itself is going to be what transforms it. Not, "Oh, but my partner has to read the same book I did and then we're gonna be okay."

[0:17:49.6] CC: I mean, we do couples workshops and then we wound up creating a workshop, a little virtual called Relationship Mojo, because so many people said, "But my partner's not interested," or like, "That's okay. Why don't you do this instead?" Because you can do so much of showing up for yourself and learning how to express yourself and making choices and, you know, it's a system. So one person changes, it inevitably impacts the other and not necessarily in a direct straight line. But there's a shift that occurs. So I totally agree. Paula,

[0:18:20.6] PF: You also talk about couples that never fight and I had to laugh because I have a friend who just last week they have been in a relationship for five years, married for three, and she was upset because she and her husband had their first fight and I was like, "Are you kidding me?" I kept asking our questions that I probably shouldn't have been asking because I was like, "What? No, for real?"

So what about those couples that never fight?

[0:18:45.6] CC: This is CrisMarie. I think so often, you know, there's nothing wrong with not fighting, but it wouldn't be my choice. And my hunch is, a lot of times if there's no boundaries, there's no conflict. Meaning if I'm not saying, "No, I don't like that." Or, "Yes, I want this," whatever it is, "I want to save more. I want to move. I wanna have more sex." Whatever it is, if I'm not defining myself then the other person, Susan, doesn't have anything to bump up against. So if I'm always going along, you know, I'm not showing up as me. And that's what's been so different for me and what has created so much more vitality in my life is, yeah, I am going to say, "I don't want this or I don't like this," because I'm talking about myself.

[0:19:31.6] SC: I totally agree. Like I don't — I like that quote of you know, "No boundaries, you know, no conflict" because and boundaries are simply the self expression. Like there's a saying about passion, is that the soul's desire to express and for that to happen, there's going to be

pressure. You're going to come out and meet the world around you, and that generally is your most significant other person. They're a big part of that and so if that's not happening at all, I actually think I would be a little concerned.

Now you said that this particular couple had been married three years. There's usually this three year kind of —

[0:20:07.6] CC: Bubble.

[0:20:08.6] SC: Bubble. You know?

[0:20:08.6] PF: I've never had that bubble.

[0:20:12.6] SC: Neither have I. But, you know, I have heard rumors that there's one out there. It's like when people tell me that — Like, I'm a big believer that we all have of within us this passion and desire and sometimes it comes out hot. It just doesn't matter. You know? Maybe the only person on the planet I think who it doesn't come out, might be the Dalai Lama.

[0:20:32.6] CC: No, he even says he gets angry.

[0:20:33.6] CC: Okay. Well, there you go. So, to us it's more of a sign that if there isn't any conflict that are you really showing up? Because at some point in time that could be costly.

[0:20:41.6] CC: I mean, because we talk about being a full me in the face of a we and so often when there's not a conflict, people are prioritizing the “we”. Like I've got to get along to go along like I did growing up and they're not really fueling their own inner passion and that's eventually what happens is people try to be the good wife, the good partner, good husband, whatever it is. And they eventually run into feeling pretty apathetic and then it comes across passive aggressive because they're not really feeling fully expressed in speaking up and saying what they want, what they don't want.

[0:21:17.6] PF: So many times we believe that compatibility is gonna be the biggest indicator of whether that couple is gonna have a successful relationship, whether we should stay in that. But you actually say it's something else beyond compatibility. Can you talk about that?

[0:21:32.6] CC: Well, we do believe that because any two people, no matter how similar you may seem on the outside, we like the same things. We are different human beings. If we're willing to bring that forward, we have this edge where we can actually get curious and interested about each other, and that is quite an alive spot.

[0:21:51.6] SC: The other piece of that is that, you know, I this just may be me, but I don't think I'd ever wanted to spend little my entire life with someone just like me. That would be incredibly —

[0:22:00.6] PF: Because that could just be alone.

[0:22:03.6] SC: Yeah, and I do think a lot of times that we talk about this in the book in that romance phase, so much of it is really you're having a relationship with your own imagination. It really is mostly what you project onto the other person and that's how come it's sort of, I jokingly said it was drug induced. There's a lot of dopamine released. There's all sorts of stuff that makes you feel good. But the reality of it is it's all in your imagination

[0:22:30.6] CC: Because usually we don't tell our romance is like, "Oh I meet this person and they're gonna, you know, they're going — We're going to get married, have kids, the white picket fence," all that's happening in an instant. None of that is revealed in this whole dating. You know, dance that we do.

[0:22:45.6] SC: So then what happens is as soon as that you get together over time you begin, "This person isn't quite doing what I want them to do, but actually, if I just tweak them a little bit and give them a little nudge this way and make them, you know, put the toothpaste lid on the toothpaste and maybe pick up their socks — we'll go back to that one — they will become the person that I'm looking for." So we do a lot of that in the early stages of relationships. Just these little like, "I'm just gonna shift them a little to the," —

[0:23:12.6] CC: Like when I first met Susan, I wanted her — I thought my vision, my romance, which she would dress really differently than she was.

[0:23:19.6] SC: We were working in the corporate —

[0:23:21.6] CC: Yeah, we were working a corporate event and she showed up in jeans and a sweater and I'm like — So I didn't say anything about that. What I did is I took her to Nordstrom's in the personal shopper section, and I had pre-talked to the personal shopper with all the outfits on sale.

[0:23:34.6] SC: I had no idea why I was at this — it was amazing to me that these things would show up, like as though, “Okay, you're going to wear that?” And I'd be like, “Why do you keep sending me to personal shoppers?”

[0:23:48.6] CC: Rather than say, “I think you need to look at your dress,” or, “I'm uncomfortable with how you're dressing,” any of those would have been more upfront. But we don't. We hint. We nudge. We try to control. We manage trying to get this —

[0:23:59.6] SC: We throw away their clothes when they're not looking.

[0:24:03.6] CC: Yes, exactly.

[0:24:04.6] SC: Instead of having that conversation where it's like, “You know, I was imagining this now.” Now, a lot of times that's a hard place to go to to own up to like, “I really thought you were gonna be way different than what I was expecting.” Like me, CrisMarie's an Olympic athlete and so I had this vision that when we did stuff together, we would be biking and in the outdoors. Like, you know, I took on a bike trip wants and I did most of the pedaling. It was like —

[0:24:29.6] CC: We were on a tandem bike.

[0:24:30.6] SC: A tandem bike, and she never, you know, I was like, “Really?”

[0:24:35.6] CC: My idea of trip is a hotel or a five star resort with a glass of wine.

[0:24:39.6] SC: But I hadn't, you know, I may not have even been aware of how much I was projecting this story on her because, you know, sometimes we don't even know that we've created this whole romance in our mind about what life should look like. And until we have that

discussion and realize, “Wow, wait a minute. I didn't think five kids. I maybe thought one, but no way are we having five.” You know? Or, “I thought of a big dog. You thought of a small,” all sorts of things can come out of that.

[0:25:06.6] CC: So even if you think you're compatible, we think if you actually get underneath that, there's a lot of areas of differences if you're willing to bring them up and it creates more alive nous in the relationship

[0:25:16.6] PF: That's terrific and that one of the things that you say in the book is that it's the small conflicts that are the relationship killers, and we tend to think it's like the big blow ups. But it's not, according to you. So can you tell us what you mean by that and what we can do to change that?

[0:25:32.6] SC: Well so often, this is Susan speaking, in a couple there's these little things that occur and it's like, “No, that's not that big of a deal. I'm not going to say anything,” and, “Okay, that's not, I shouldn't let that bug me, and I don't say anything.” But what happens is that it's kinda we talk about it like it's like putting nails in a coffin. You know, those little things are like little tiny ways that you're shutting yourself, taking yourself out of the relationship in one respect, not saying anything and then when, you know, when CrisMarie was saying eventually what can happen is you get to the point where you start, you're in a role you're not — and you start getting interested outside of the relationship because you haven't actually brought your full self to the relationship. And so it may appear like it's an affair or some big crisis that was the issue. But nine times out of 10 it was all these little micro things that came up that you didn't say, “Oh, ouch! Oh, I don't like that,” you know? And that adds up.

[0:26:28.6] CC: Because if I can bring myself forward on those little things, it's really our differences that even create sexual charge with the other partner. If I'm not differentiating, meaning I'm just kind of saying, “Yes, doesn't bother me. No big deal,” I'm really not showing up. I'm not very interesting or a separate person, so there's not a tension between us and that tension leads to, that's what that creativity is but it's also the sexual charge and so if you can start to have the courage to say, “Okay, I'm a little bit uncomfortable, but I don't like that you leave your socks on the floor or that you don't put the toothpaste lid on,” and learning how — and we've got lots of little tools in the book that will help that if it blows up into a bigger argument.

[0:27:10.6] SC: But after spending years with couples, it wasn't the couples. The other thing is, couples that are fighting are not the biggest challenge for a marriage and family therapist. I don't think. Way bigger is when it's gotten to indifference and when a couple used to walk in, that was indifferent, that would be where I would be like, "Wow, this is way harder." If couple came in bread hot fighting, I'd be like, "Okay, we can work with this."

[0:27:35.6] CC: We've got something to work with.

[0:27:36.6] SC: Yes.

[0:27:39.6] PF: This is a fascinating book. A lot of insight really looks at it from a different angle up, so thank you so much for sharing that book with us and also just for coming on the air and talking to us today.

[0:27:49.6] SC: Oh, we had a blast. Thank you, Paula.

[0:20:07.6] CC: Thank you.

[ENF OF INTERVIEW]

[0:27:57.6] PF: That was CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke, authors of the book, *The Beauty of Conflict for Couples*. If you'd like to learn more about their work or their new book, please visit us at LiveHappyNow.com and we'll give you links and more information.

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That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you back here again next week from all new episode. And until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]