

**Episode 24: 5 Things UNHEALTHY Couples Do**

Liz Higgins (00:02):

Hey, y'all! Liz Higgins here, and welcome to the Millennial Life Podcast, where my main goal is to share conversations that will inspire you and drive you toward the life and relationship you desire. I'm here to share what I've learned as a licensed therapist and relationship coach specializing in millennial relationships and wellness, as well as transformative conversations with other professionals. Thanks for listening and enjoy today's episode!

Liz Higgins (00:34):

Hey, y'all. Bringing a bit of a different perspective to our conversation today. And, where a lot of my, um, episodes are kind of focused on the positive, actionable steps to take around the way you think about relationships, and the way you practice relationships today. I want to call out some of the UNHEALTHY things that people do in relationships, and really kind of walk through five things that unhappy couples do. I think it's important to call these things out and identify them, and hopefully help you think about growth areas or stuff that you can bring up in your relationship to your partner or whatever, and work on. You know, I often... I often wonder what people's lives are when I'm out and about in the world, you know. Back pre-pandemic, strolling the malls, or, you know, going off to walk around the outdoor shops on a weekend, or out on date night with my husband, or even now just walking around the parks with my kiddos...

Liz Higgins (01:44):

Um, seeing people out wining and dining, local cuisine. And I just wonder like, are they happy? Are they faking it 'til they make it? Are they trying to avoid the public humiliation of the reality that is their current relationship status? Like, I don't know. I think about my own relationship and the times I've walked out the door feeling incredibly frustrated, discouraged, disappointed in my relationship, but five minutes later, I'm all smiles as we meet up with friends to socialize. And I think that's one of those unspoken rules that a lot of us follow. It's like, don't bring that pain that's happening in your relationship out into public scenarios. Obviously that happens and life's not perfect, but a lot of times we put that stuff away and we put out that persona of how we want others to perceive us, which is that we've got it all together.

Liz Higgins (02:38):

I think about couples I know personally - ones that seem to have it all together and you know, all the time they seem so happy in their lives. And now we've got social media giving us this glimpse into people's internal environments, their homes, their lives, you know, on a very personal level. Are they really happy, or is it a cover for what we know is actually the truth? Across the board, in all relationships, we have problems. That we change. We grow. Sometimes a part that we struggle and that we will disagree, that we do have conflict. I mean, that's the truth. And we could just wrap up this episode today with that fact and let it be enough to say "let's stop faking so much and openly talk about the pain points of relationships because nobody's perfect", but alas, we live in the Instagram culture and a lot of what you see out there can definitely inflict some of that FOMO in yourself.

Liz Higgins (03:41):

If you start to go with that narrative, that "oh, so-and-so's life is perfect. Oh my God, so-and-so's partner. They just treat them so great. Why can't I have that?". So anyways, I'm not saying that every unhappy couple out there puts on a mask to the outside world. And I'm also not saying it's a bad decision if they do. Um, there's definitely something healthy about compartmentalizing your personal problems and sharing those, exposing those to the proper people, to professionals, to safe relationships that you have. But... Just so you don't have to wonder what makes a couple unhappy, I've put together some thoughts based on things that I've seen, things I've experienced, soaking in research on couple relationships. Many of these things that happen within the first 10 years or less of a committed relationship. So! Five common dynamics in unhealthy couples. Let me start with number one. Or, you know what... Maybe, maybe what I should do is just give you a little bit of a, this is what they are.

Liz Higgins (04:46):

So, ONE is going to be their expectations change and they don't talk about it. TWO is they don't prioritize the relationship. Oh, I can't wait to get to that one. THREE is that quality time is not intentional time. FOUR is they don't listen. And FIVE is boundaries. They never had a talk about boundaries. So let's go back to one, their expectations change and they don't talk about it. Oh my God. This is like, one of the most important things to me. When I think about committed relationships, long-term relationships and people that really want to do that thing... You have to embrace the fact that you're going to change. You may have done a great job of starting your relationship out, uh, with a great foundation, open communication, sharing your life, sharing your goals, talking about how many kids you want if you want them... What many couples don't realize and honor, though, is that these very things that you put out there at the beginning and connected to even, can, and most likely will, change over time.

Liz Higgins (06:04):

In my work with couples, it's not uncommon to hear "That's not what you told me when we first got together. I thought we had an agreement about this thing, or, you know, that's completely different from what you said last week when we talked about this" and I see it's a very painful moment to be in. And that's true when something that feels really important to you has changed for your partner. But the point is, change happens. And you are allowed to change, and you're allowed to grow, and you're allowed to change your mind. And so is your partner. So the goal is to be communicative about that. So we've got to get ready and work towards becoming flexible, understanding, open to change when it comes to your relationship. Because it's not a matter of will we change? It's WHEN will we change and how will we navigate that change? How can I show up for you as you grow and become who you're going to be, and how can I support you in being the same for me, rigidity holds no place in relationships today because we're constantly changing and millennials more than ever.

Liz Higgins (07:17):

We're on this, like, introspective relational journey to become our best self. And so... No offense, but we can't stay stuck thinking that you're going to always be, or that your partner's always going to be, who they were when you first came together. Can you look at them? And can you acknowledge, 'wow, this person that I'm sharing a life with could be changing right now. Could be on this path of becoming a very different person'. And I don't want you to hear that and think of it as this scary, uncertain thing. You have to be able to embrace the, you know, 10% uncertainty. This might bring you (and blended in with excitement and opportunity to be on board) to grow together and to maintain space to talk about this stuff. That's where I love... I love, love, love the couples that come in together for therapy or coaching or whatever,

Liz Higgins (08:16):

And, and they're kind of just there to hold space. To learn healthy ways of talking about hopes, dreams, goals, visions. I mean, we're a very visionary generation, and I hear lots of couples come in and say that like, 'there's not a huge pressing problem right now, but we want to make sure we are prioritizing our relationship. Life is so incredibly busy. And right now holding this one or two hours every week for this space is the way that we're going to do that. And we're going to make that commitment to each other'. So that kind of leads into number two. Unhealthy couples, they don't prioritize their relationship. And, Oh my God, y'all! Once I heard a client say in a session, I don't like, like, literally this is like ingrained in my brain. It was a painful moment for me. Um, it was a guy he said, "I don't need to worry about making her feel special.

Liz Higgins (09:09):

We're married. She already knows she's special. We already made that commitment. Why should I have to like, do extra work to make sure she knows that?" Oh! So now I know why they had us practice sitting in silence and working on our own facial expressions in grad school. Um, cause I think my jaw dropped a bit in that session. But ugh, well, um, you know... Though, strangely I could, I could understand where this person was coming from. We are still tied to some pretty old and often patriarchal views of relationships. And, and here's the reality: after years of being in a committed relationship or committed to anything in life, we tend to get kind of assumptive and lazy. We take special things for granted. But listen, I am here to tell you that healthy couples do not take their partner for granted. They don't. Unhealthy couples probably do.

Liz Higgins (10:12):

They typically do. I mean, this person was in therapy with their partner for a reason. Your relationship has to remain a priority. Once you assume that you don't have to work for it, that you don't have to work for your partner's love, that you don't have to nurture it. And oooh. Once you think that you know everything there is to know about them, you're in the danger zone. You have officially walked in to the danger zone of relationships. So... Hey, if that is happening to you, if you're feeling like you're maybe experiencing that, uh, happening with your partner, like, take this opportunity. Pump the brakes, carve out some space. Talk about the health of your relationship. I think that also prioritizing your relationship becomes more challenging, uh, the longer in you are, and the more success and energy you're putting into other areas of life. I mean, I work with a lot of high achieving clients.

Liz Higgins (11:17):

They work their asses off in their careers. They've got direction, they've got a vision, they know where they're headed. And unfortunately, that can really, really take precedence over the wellness of their relationship. And let's be honest, their own individual health and wellness! People not sleeping, not eating healthy, not drinking water... These are just some of those basic needs that really ought to be there to help us bring our best self to all that we do. And it's, it's a real dichotomy. Our world today is very encouraging of that 'bust your ass and work for your dreams' mantra and mentality. I mean, I think there's more entrepreneurs in the millennial generation than any before, and that's affecting how we show up and how we strategize and prioritize our relationship. And you will hear me say this firmly as an entrepreneur, as a hardworking woman, as a parent - my marriage has to stay number one.

Liz Higgins (12:27):

If I wanted to work long-term, I mean... I was in a mindset call this morning for my business coaching and they are all talking about those quick (but very meaningful, very intentional) daily exercises we can continue to do to stay balanced and stay kind of in our best self rather than starting our days out, you know, already sucked out of energy and already stressed and already overwhelmed. That is so true when it comes to relationships too. This stuff doesn't have to take a ton of time. It's not like, 'Oh my gosh, you know, you're so busy. And now I'm asking you to implement an hour a day for time for your relationship, and to sit and talk about feelings'. Not necessarily! This can be as intentional as sending quick texts when you're thinking about your partner. Um, being strategic about implementing date nights, making those things consistent.

Liz Higgins (13:23):

Time and time again, I have couples come in that are stressed and disconnected and busy as hell and not prioritizing their relationship. And oftentimes just getting into this groove of reintegrating date nights, time away, and kind of making those rules of 'let's not talk about work. Let's not pull out our phones. Let's just be together'. It, um, it really turns things around much quicker. People are surprised it's that simple, but oftentimes it can be a simple shift. So really prioritize your relationship because you don't want to be an unhealthy couple. And that's what they do. Quality time is not intentional time. So that's my number three - unhealthy couples don't know the difference between quality time and intentional time. It's one thing to set aside that time to spend with your partner. And it's a whole other thing to create intentional moments of connection, play, and growth together. Being intentional with your time. It means you don't just clear the schedule and sit on your couches. You don't sit separately, scrolling through social media, browsing Facebook or texting other friends while you're watching Netflix. Intentional time is really more like a date night, an activity - cook dinner together. Yes, talk about your days, but like, engage with each other. Pull out a board game, put the phones aside for the evening. Unhealthy couples have almost always forgotten how to spend active time together. And they really feel more like roommates.

Liz Higgins (15:00):

Number four, unhealthy couples don't listen. And it's, it's interesting because 9 times out of 10, couples struggling in their relationship, coin communication as their top issue. And they think that they are listening. And they think that they are hearing. And they're just totally not. You know, they're more in reactive mode than responsive mode and it's so true. Anybody that's gone through any kind of active listening training or whatever, knows that listening really is a skill. It's a very different process than that of sharing, that of speaking and expressing. You gotta turn yourself down so that you can really tune in to what your partner is expressing. Um, couples that are struggling in their relationship, a lot of times they've drifted away from, like, an optimistic mindset. They're more in defense mode more of the time. And so, a lot of times it's like, relearning how to have that healthy and effective dialogue. To bring the walls down, to be able to tune in and to remember that your healthy boundaries contain and protect what is important for you.

Liz Higgins (16:17):

That's still true too, but you can tune in more and really hear what's going on. On the other side of things, listening is becoming the last thing a person wants to do in an unhealthy relationship simply because communication becomes your war zone. And so, I mean, you can walk through the door and feel like on edge about, you know, what's going to come at me here in a minute, rather just not do it. And you're already retreating. Your nervous system is Arnie activating in a protective way to keep the conflict at Bay. But what you really do over time is you're avoiding any kind of opportunity to be, to be close, to learn, to remain curious and to be in tune with each other. So listening is actually incredibly important. And when you're in a negative space in your relationship, it's usually the last thing you're doing.

Liz Higgins (17:13):

Number five! Unhealthy couples never had the boundaries talk. Um, so I think boundaries talk has a lot to do with a lot of different things. And honestly, I'm probably gonna devote an entire other podcast (and I'll probably have a guest come on to even talk to me about this, about boundaries and how important they are)... but, um, there's boundaries as it relates to your prospective families, there's boundaries as it relates to what you do and don't want in your relationship, what you will and won't practice, there's boundaries around social media, there's boundaries around the kind of other relationship constructs you have with friends and coworkers and things like that... There's all sorts of boundaries. And believe it or not, plenty of couples don't devote time early on in their relationship to explore some of these things. And I do want to normalize that you can be in a really open and communicative relationship and something still will happen eventually where it's a boundary violation.

Liz Higgins (18:23):

Something happens that you are not cool with. And there's a lot of times that there's no way that you could 100% avoid those types of things, but it becomes a choice. 'Do I learn and grow from this in this relationship? Or does this mean something about taking a different direction?' You know, whatever. The point on this one is that unhealthy couples are not talking about these kinds of things. They maybe shut down or they blow up. I mean, it can be lots of different reactions, but that's just, it. It's, it... You're reacting based on these boundaries and values and needs that you never actually identified or expressed. And it's a bummer to be in that space. But I also want you to feel the potential here that you can always open up these kinds of dialogues. And if you're feeling really shaky about that, if you are nervous and too anxious to bring up things about yourself or things you want to ask your partner for, that's where a third party - a therapist, a coach, something - can really help you open up a safe platform with each other to have that kind of conversation.

Liz Higgins (19:47):

As unhealthy as these things are, as I've described them, we often get really comfortable with being complacent, you know. Not prioritizing our relationship, not carving out time to talk about this stuff, not internally exploring and staying in touch with our needs and expectations and boundaries, but it is critical for a long-term relationship to succeed. So I hope this was helpful! Definitely let me know what you think, and stay tuned. I've got some great stuff coming up with some awesome guests on the podcast, and I look forward to sharing more with you then. Have a great one!

Thanks again for listening to the podcast. If you like the show, leave us five stars or write a review. If you're interested in learning more, sign up for my free ebook “The One Barrier to Commitment All Millennials Face” at [millennialrelationships.com.](http://millennialrelationships.com/)

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