



Episode 39: Breaking Down Criticism and Blame, A Conversation with Liz Higgins

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 everybody! It's so good to be hopping on here and sharing a solo episode today. The last run of podcasts that I have done have been interviews, and I have just had a complete blast talking with other professionals, with other therapists, coaches, thought leaders... All these incredible individuals that have come on this podcast! And, had just some really engaging and wonderful, insightful conversations. So I thank all of you that I see listening along and tuning in to these episodes each week. This is seriously why I'm doing this - is to hopefully bring some encouragement and some hope to you. And really, sincerely, from the bottom of my heart... I just thank you for listening. It's been a fun thing doing this podcast, and I'm excited to keep it going! And, and we'll share some more in the next episode with you about the intention behind this podcast, and where it's going to head, and exciting updates that I have, um, that I'm just gearing up to launch.

Liz Higgins (01:40):

So today though, I wanted to talk a little bit about two dynamics that happen in relationships that are actually quite unhealthy. And those are criticism and blame. And so, you know, you're probably listening to this podcast, I guess, because you were already listening to this podcast. And again, I thank you for being a listener and tuning in with me. Letting me in your ears each week... But perhaps you're listening because you were caught by the title of 'criticism and blame' and are experiencing this in your relationship. And for reference, yes - I do really focus these conversations on a committed partner relationship because that's, that's what I do. That's what I'm about. But the reality is that this stuff can pop up in many different relationships. And so whether you're single, dating, in a committed relationship, um, really any status... It doesn't matter. Because you can learn, and grow, and develop yourself in relationship, um, on a lot of different levels.

Liz Higgins (02:55):

Um, I think it's really crazy to think about how little relationship education we get in our life, yet we're expected to somehow reap successful relationships. And the stats are constantly there that we, we want this, we want committed relationships. We still like the idea of marriage, settling down, finding a partner and creating a life together. We want commitment. That's not really a question. The question is how do we actually cultivate and sustain a commitment that lasts? And you have to know what works/ you have to know what's healthy and what you can start doing differently to cultivate the kind of relationship you want. And so I want everybody listening to feel incredibly empowered when I say this truth - change really begins with you. So even if you are in a relationship right now, and you're feeling tired, you're tired of feeling like the efforts are one sided.

Liz Higgins (04:02):

You're tired of feeling unheard or not seen in the relationship... No matter how many different ways you try to help your partner get it, you're feeling discouraged. You feel defeated, you feel disconnected. You want to know how you can bring your partner's walls down. You want to know how you can get through to them... Well, I'm excited because today we're going to talk about some of that. And here's the thing! By you being the one that is listening to this right now, you're kind of the quote unquote "chosen one: in this moment to really take something from this conversation today and put it into action. It can be really, really hard not to get ourselves stuck in this mentality of conditional change. I talk about that a lot with clients, and conditional change is essentially that piece of how I'll start making changes. "When I see you making changes, my healthy adjustments, and trying to work at this being better, is conditional on you doing it most of the time first."

Liz Higgins (05:11):

And it's really an unhealthy mindset to have, because a lot of times we grow and change and develop and heal and get better at different paces. And that's just reality. I do believe that, you know, trust and really seeing that shared effort, um, happen from your partner is an incredibly important thing. But I want you to feel empowered, to know that you can make shifts right here, right now in yourself. And that that actually will invite some change to come your way, too. So, in relationships that always takes two, but sometimes it just starts with one. So I want to talk first about criticism. And criticism, uh, to define it, is essentially the expression or disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes. And I was just working with a couple earlier today, and they get so incredibly caught in this cycle of criticism with one another where they can't even tune in and listen to what the other person is trying to express about their experience. They get so sucked into the pieces of what they're perceiving their partner to get wrong about them, or what they're perceiving that their partner is doing wrong, or thinking, or feeling wrong.

Liz Higgins (06:43):

And these things all come out as subtle, passive aggressive, or pervasive and blatant attacks in the form of criticism. And it's incredibly important to remember that criticism is not constructive guidance. Those are two different things. It's not how things could be better. It, it's not a healthy request. It is basically a focus on what your partner is doing wrong. And beyond that, it attempts to really get them right at their core. It intends to hurt. It is a protective mechanism. So when we're activated and we are being critical of others, you know, we're, we're pushing connection away. And when you attempt to hurt your partner (consciously or unconsciously), their natural response is understandably going to be to protect themselves. To wall up

or to fight back. And let's just break this down for a minute, because in a different kind of context, I think that that's totally valid, right?

Liz Higgins (07:51):

Would you not do the same in the face of a threat? You would fight back, you get protective of yourself back. And so while criticism may sound and look different - depending on the situation - the basic characteristic of it is that there's a focus on you. There's a focus on the other. And criticism essentially demands that the person is the problem. It seldom involves taking responsibility for one's own feelings, thoughts, or behaviors. Um, if it does, and you're being critical of others, you're kind of using those things in a context to have more ammo. So I, I hear criticisms a lot of different ways as a couples therapist and relationship coach. There's kind of nothing I haven't heard in the way of criticism. And it's funny because I think that a lot of clients are trying to be kind of on their best behavior when they come to therapy sometimes.

Liz Higgins (08:51):

And it's funny because those criticisms still come out, but they're not as harsh as I know they probably sound when people are back at home. But it could be, it could be about anything. And again, the focus is on the person as faulty, rather than on the behavior. So it's like, you know... "How hard is it for you to remember one simple thing? You're so thoughtless, you can't stay committed to anything you'll say you'll do. Are you seriously that lazy?" Those types of things, really directed at the person. So why is criticism so awful in relationship, even though the reasons why we do it might make sense sometimes? Well, because criticism is a fast road to emotional shut down and disconnection. I like to say the, the heart wants to connect. The brain wants to protect. And so when we are in a state of activation, there's so much we know about the brain now and how our nervous system, um, really goes into high gear and fight, flight, freeze, fawn.

Liz Higgins (10:06):

We react. We become reactive, and we start to shoot the ammo outward to really, really prohibit ourselves from staying connected in whatever vulnerable thing is happening. And criticism is one of those defense mechanisms that people pull on. A lot of times it can be paired with a passive aggressive tone. It's almost always going to get your partner on the opposite team. As you're feeling small, inferior, or less than... Certainly feeling attacked, with slim to no way out on a more vulnerable level. Criticism can really inflict shame on people, which makes them hurt. It is hurtful. So we have to really be aware of the damaging effects of criticism. And, you know, it's important to say, and I talk about this in other episodes, too... (Of course, this is not me saying don't protect yourself and don't stand up for yourself through love and responsibility when you are being attacked or when you're being hurt. This is not about allowing abuse. Okay? We're not talking about that.).

Liz Higgins (11:19):

But I am talking about many, many, many people out there who get caught up in this pattern of using criticism as, as an unhealthy way of trying to get their point across because it's invulnerable. And it really feeds on this idea that, you know, we have to be so incredibly independent. And it's non-relational. Okay. So what do we want to learn to do instead of being critical, instead of criticizing our partner... What can we do differently? Well. Try this out - learn to make a request. Okay? I know that complaining annoys people sometimes, but complaining is not inherently a bad thing. And when it's done respectfully and with a

healthy intent, you can make requests, you can ask your partner for what you need. And for some, this is actually pretty vulnerable.

Liz Higgins (12:16):

I work with a lot of, a lot of fiercely independent perfectionistic heroes. I really do. And invulnerability comes with that kind of persona - relationally speaking. So it's a real growth edge for people to not be critical, but to actually be comfortable in expressing a need or a request from somebody. So as a concept... Please hear me when I say like, I'm normalizing that this is hard to do. Really normalizing it! It is hard for me to do. And I'm consciously aware of this piece, um, in my own life. And I have to, I, I feel that vulnerability sometimes of... "Okay, I'm not going to go into doing what I know I could do, which is become really critical, and nasty, and mean. But I'm going to express what I'm feeling and what's going on with me right now and what I actually need." Very different vibe.

Liz Higgins (13:17):

Okay. And this is about trying something new. So please remember that. So you don't have the right to tear somebody down as a person. You don't deserve that, and neither do they. So we don't want to be emotionally abusive. And criticism can get to that level. It really, really can. So a proper complaint will shift the focus away from attacks on your partner's character and back to where it belongs, which is really maybe on the behavior, on the need. A request allows the focus to go where it should - to the needs that you have in your relationship. Okay. And it gives your partner the chance to hear what upsets you the most and what makes, what maybe happened to get you to that level of activation. Whether you're, whether you're feeling angry, frustrated, alone, tired, disconnected, something like that. And here's the thing, you know. Your partner may still come back with a negative reaction, but I want to go back to what I mentioned at the start of this episode.

Liz Higgins (14:20):

Change begins with you. Old habits die hard. They really do. And if you come into this interaction from a different stance, from directly requesting or expressing a need, that is... that's a success. Because you just expressed yourself in a much healthier way than you could have. We're not focusing in this moment, yet, on how your partner responds. Okay? So it's being able to hold yourself in a really warm regard, for even trying to do a little bit better. Okay. Something to be aware of is that criticism often finds a way of becoming a chronic pattern in long-term relationships. So if you're not nurturing the health of your relationship, things like criticism, things like blame, those kind of weave themselves into lots of your interactions. And you want to be aware of that. Okay. The, the promise of all this is that with effort and intention, it can and will change.

Liz Higgins (15:26):

So asking for what you need in a relationship, making a direct request, can be a vulnerable thing to do. But, you know, we all need relationship. This is part of the human experience. So we can just stop denying that reality, right here - move into a space where we can effectively get the relationship and the interactions and our relationships that we want. Okay. So I want to shift to blame. Blame, blame, blame. So much blame can occur in an unhealthy relationship or, um, you know, it subtly finds its way into healthy relationships. Um, but basically it's finding an external source to target for your own discomfort, unhappiness, or frustration with something. Okay. So it's really crucial to get this and understand how

blame works as a protective mechanism in order to make the shift. So just remember this - blame is fault-finding, right? Uh, lots of 'you statements'.

Liz Higgins (16:32):

"You never do what I ask. You're just that way because your dad did the same thing to your mom. It's your fault. I didn't do that. You did." Lots of 'you statements'. And you just can't simply put all responsibility for your frustrations onto something or someone else. I know what you must be thinking right now. Um, you're probably thinking through a list of undeserving behaviors that no one should have to endure. Things that your partner really did do that they are responsible for. I get it. I get it. I get it. It's not that we don't do things, you know, that we shouldn't be accountable for. But the reality is that when our relationships are in rocky places, blame can be one of the pieces of ammo, again, that we are quick to pull out to protect ourselves. So in the midst of an activated state, blame is often present.

Liz Higgins (17:32):

Okay. So A doesn't always cause B. Relationships aren't that simple. Blame is a defense mechanism. We use it all the time. And I, I love the definition that Brene Brown, um, uses to define blame. She calls it the discharge of pain and discomfort. Ooh. So that's huge. Think about that. Blame is the discharge of pain and discomfort. Yeah. Call it what it is. Right? We're trying to focus our invulnerability onto somebody else, making them responsible so that we don't have to look at or feel what's going on within us. So let's do a reframe here for a moment. When you blame, when you are blaming your partner, what's your pain saying? What might you be hurting about? What is discharging from you? What feels uncomfortable to face in that moment? These are incredibly important questions for you to become the explorer of. It's really and truly no one else's responsibility but yours' to begin that process of exploring what goes on in me when blame is occurring.

Liz Higgins (19:01):

And if your partner is blaming you, kind of the same deal. Okay, stop, don't react. First, become an explorer. What might be, what might your partner's pain be saying? What might your partner be hurting about? What discomfort might your partner be experiencing? Why might it be safer for them to protect themselves in this moment? These are the deeper questions that if you were to get your booty into couples therapy, individual therapy, coaching, anything like that, and got a little more woke in your relationship, these are the things you're gonna learn to explore about yourself. Because it's like... We can identify the behaviors all day long. 'Oh, we're so mean to each other. We don't know how to communicate. We just get into these nasty disagreements. There's name-calling, lots of blame and criticism.' Okay. So we know we don't want that stuff to continue happening. We've got to be able to dig down and really explore on a deeper level what all of that stuff is actually representing.

Liz Higgins (20:12):

So we, we want to ultimately allow ourselves to move away from blame and become more compassionate and emotionally tuned in to our partner. And that is a game changer. So I wanted to touch on these, these two dynamics. I feel like I could go on and on, but I'm going to stop here. And I'm going to continue doing this with some more of the relational dynamics people get caught up in in healthier phases of relationship... And put the stuff out there so that you can really digest it, and process it, and think it through. And I say this a lot, but really - if something has landed for you or touched you, or you have a question or feedback for me on something you'd like to hear me talk on, definitely reach out, hit me up!

Because I am so incredibly passionate about providing relevant skills, tools and deeper self-understanding so that you can have truly incredible relational experiences. Um, I think that for me, when I think about relational health, it all starts at the very beginning. It all starts with real relational self-awareness. And that is a practice you cultivate. So look at yourself first. Think about criticism. Think about blame. Think about how you maybe utilize those tactics in your relationship. Does it show up more with certain people compared to other people? Does this happen in partner relationships? And let's start thinking about what that is about. All right. Okay. Until next time!

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 e-book "The One Barrier to Commitment All Millennials Face" at millenniallifecounseling.com.

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