

MARRIAGE IN MOTION

Transcript: Module 2, Lesson 3

ZACH

Hi there. It's really cool that you're here. And I'm really excited to share with you today an issue that's near and dear to my own heart. It's Empathy.

I know we've talked about this before - but we're going to go a bit deeper with this. Because if there's a secret to conflict management, this is it.

LAURA

So...technically, "empathy", It's the ability to understand another person's point of view. But it's not just that. It's the ability to feel what they're feeling. To believe that their experience is valuable. Important. Maybe even more valuable and more important than your own.

If you have trouble recognizing empathy, you can definitely recognize its opposite: Apathy. Misunderstanding. Selfishness. Even narcissism.

People who lack empathy, lack the ability to recognize or care about their impact on other people. This is an intimacy and relationship killer.

This lesson is all about conflict management. In this lesson I want to draw a straight line between empathy and intimacy, even in the midst of conflict.

But I want to be clear before we start...empathy is not about rolling over and giving in to your partner. Empathy isn't being soft. It's actually extremely powerful...and sexy. Which makes it the key to intimacy.

So, this lesson is about how to build emotional intimacy, even in the midst of conflict. In the video you'll learn...

1. Why empathy in conflict is actually an exercise in intimacy.
2. The one small shift that will invite empathy from your partner
3. How to move toward intimate conflict.
4. The power of a common enemy.
5. Why you've got the whole idea of conflict backwards.
6. To become clear about your "next step".

What makes conflict so difficult is that we quickly become entrenched in our own ideas and our own goals our own agendas. It's pretty natural. As human beings, we're programmed for survival. Much of the way we behave in conflict is because we are protecting ourselves. When you focus on just your-

self, it makes intimacy impossible.

So the focus for this lesson is:

Emotional Intimacy builds when you can validate your partner's point of view, even when you don't agree with it.

ZACH

Whether you realize it or not, you do have the ability to hear and process points of view that you don't agree with.

Imagine running into an old friend on the street. Imagine you got into a conversation about politics and you quickly realize that his views are deplorable to you and that you cannot stay silent. Imagine how that conversation would go.

Now imagine needing to engage that same content, but this time, you're a student in a classroom. Your professor is presenting those same - in your opinion - deplorable views, but you've got a test next week, and you've got to show that you understand the content.

Clearly - that your reaction to the content in class would be different? I suspect you'd be able to suspend your judgment long enough to engage thoughtfully, and in this case, validate your professor's point of view by passing the test.

I understand this is a lot tougher in the heat of the moment when you just can't understand why the sink is full of dishes again, or she's made you late for your appointment again, or he just doesn't get it.

I want to propose that focusing on empathy in conflict is actually an exercise in intimacy.

Here's what we want you to understand in this lesson: Conflict is actually a privilege of marriage... at least intimate conflict is. And empathy is what makes conflict intimate.

LAURA

As friends and colleagues, Zach and I have conflict, but it's not intimate. It's functional. Transactional. Ryan and I on the other hand... our conflict has high stakes...about our finances, our son, our dreams,

The quality of our conflict is different. More sacred. It requires vulnerability and openness. It requires courage to move through the conflict into deeper connection. The minute we become entrenched in our own position, and allow "fight or flight" to take over, intimacy fades quickly.

Fight and flight are impulses in conflict, either to attack or to run away your partner. These impulses rarely help. Empathy is the process of suspending those impulses long enough to understand both sides of an issue. I get the impulse, I really do, but you have to learn to move through it.

Then, as you move toward one another the possibility of intimate engagement becomes possible. There's a reason they call it "make-up sex". And we've all seen the scene in every movie ever where she beats his chest until she falls into his embrace.

There's something powerful about moving through conflict. And it's not that difficult if you'll consider making one subtle shift.

ZACH

There's a simple shift that can help facilitate this moving through, especially if you're the one that's bringing the complaint. If you can wrap your head around it, will make a ton of difference in your conflict discussion, I promise.

Consider the difference between Desire and Demand. I don't know about you, but I get into the most trouble when I express my complaints as demands. As though, somehow Rebecca owes me something. Very rarely is she responsive to my demand. More often than not, my demand gives her permission to be defensive...and then we're off to the races.

BUT, when I can make the shift from Demand to Desire, everything changes. In a healthy relationship, both partners need to be able to express what they truly want from the relationship and from one another.

Here's another way to think about it...Instead of saying, "I NEED..." with an emphasis on YOU and your NEED, cast your eyes up to the sky (seriously, actually do this) and say "I think what I really NEED is..." Can you tell the difference? The bottom line is that you want to set one another up to be empathetic.

And let's talk a little bit about how to do that. Let's say you don't have the primary complaint. You're the listener. I want to give you sense of where and how to move. Maybe it will help if you can visualize it.

Imagine a quadrant. In this quadrant, on one axis you have "tenderness". On the other you have "strength". So each corner represents a different combination of those two personality characteristics.

So, when you're facing your partner's complaint, you have one of four response categories - each with varying degrees of intensity.

The ideal quadrant is #1, where you respond with both strength and tenderness. This is the most empathetic position. I'm clear about my own point of view, but I'm compassionate with yours. Empathy isn't just rolling over for your partner...that's down here in quadrant #4, tender but not strong. Naive and empty.

The opposite, strong but not tender, begins to approach contempt and even abuse. Obviously a response that is neither strong nor tender is useless maybe even absent. Certainly no room for intimacy here. But here's the great thing about quadrants:

They're like maps that provide a context for movement. Take a minute to mentally plot yourself. Be honest. Be more honest. That's your starting point and your goal is to head northeast...toward Quadrant #1. This is where empathy lives.

LAURA

Your ability to be both tender and strong creates a context for intimacy. When you can be both firm in your position and gracious in your presentation, you can draw closer to your partner and appreciate their point of view. If you lack conviction or if you're too harsh in your approach, it's easy to think of your partner as an enemy. This never ends well and it's why you need a common enemy.

A common enemy is a powerful intimacy creator. I know a lot of couples who do not like this language. They find it too combative, but the nature of conflict is combative. What happens to couples more often than not, however, is that they perceive one another as the enemy.

Don't get me wrong, you NEED an enemy, but it can't be your partner. Your enemy might be the Four Horsemen. It might be your spouse's boss. It might even be your kids.

ZACH

My kids are older, but they're still experts at finding ways to wedge between us. But we have a ton of common enemies. Sometimes it's financial strain. Sometimes it's our in-laws. Sometimes it's our neighbor's dog.

I actually don't care what it is. Once I realized that a common enemy gave us a reason to stay connected, I became committed to finding it. Reb and I have to remind each other often that we are not the enemy. Something else is...

LAURA

You need to identify and lock arms against your common enemy. It's incredibly powerful. If you can recognize that your enemy is external to your relationship, you can create a united intimate front. Also, if I know that I'm not your enemy, I can generate a lot more empathy for your struggle against the stress and strain that keeps us stuck.

Intimacy is when we move together toward the enemy that is threatening our peace of mind. Have you ever heard soldiers recount their memory of being in battle together? If you ever needed convincing about the power of a common enemy, these kinds of stories are astounding.

I think the most important thing I'd want to realize through this lesson is that you've got the whole idea of conflict backwards. You think your relationship will improve when you resolve your issues. But it's the other way around...you can only resolve your issues when you improve your relationship.

We waste a lot of time trying to make sure that our partner understands our point of view. That's also backwards. The reality is that we cannot change unless we feel known and understood by our partner. Empathy is the secret.

Remember what we've been saying all along. Your relationship is going to have struggle. A lot of it. 2/3rds of it will be perpetual. If you're in this for the long haul, you're going to be tempted to bail. But if you concentrate on staying the course, and staying connected, your best days are ahead of you. I promise.

The good news is that empathy can be learned. It can even be mechanized, at least to start. The thing to remember is, you will experience conflict in your relationship and you do NOT have to agree with your partner to feel close, connected and validated.

What IS important is that you actively seek to understand your partner's position and validate their feelings and perspective.

ZACH

This is the part where we urge you to get clear about your next step. So, print out the activity sheet titled "Emotional Intimacy". There are a ton of instructions about how to use this sheet to deepen your connection with your spouse, so I'm not gonna give directions here. BUT, the worksheet will be

your guide for having an empathetic conversation.

Listen, take it from me. Conflict can absolutely be a pathway to intimacy. It's actually pretty amazing.

Laura and I want you to have a MARRIAGE in MOTION.. We want your relationship to transform. Honestly, we want what you want. A healthy, happy, and satisfying relationship that is for better.

So, kudos for getting this far. We'll see you in the next video.