

Think Tank: Managing relationships in today's current times

Speakers:

Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor

Marina Blake, Clinical Counselor

Erica Hanlon: Hi everybody. You are listening to a special episode of the Think Tank podcast. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and a life coach, and I am excited today to be joined by an old friend of mine and an expert in relationships, licensed professional counselor Marina Blake.

Marina Blake: Hi Erica.

Erica Hanlon: Hi Marina. Do you want to tell us a little bit about yourself?

Marina Blake: My name is Marina Blake. Hello. Thank you for inviting me onto the podcast. It's so exciting. I have been a counselor, therapist for couples, families and individuals for over 15 years now and I've been certified as a Gottman Therapist, which is a couples specialty therapy for about a year now. And that's primarily what I do is couples therapy.

Erica Hanlon: Awesome. And we brought you in today for this special podcast because people who might be listening, we're recording right now in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak and we know that people are at home and they are at home with their partners, and this puts a special strain on those relationships. So Marina, why don't you tell us a little bit about your personal relationship and how this is showing up for you?

Marina Blake: Sure. I have been with my husband, we've been together... in December it will be 10 years and we've been married for two. It took us awhile to get married, not his fault, my fault. It's not always the guy who has intimacy issues. Yeah. I'm an extrovert. I'm always wanting to talk and connect and have a chat and he is very, very much an introvert and so he needs lots of alone time and quiet time. And what we are doing, we're very good at giving each other space when needed. We're not great at everything, but we are good at that. And one of the things that I

recommend to couples that I'm following myself is on the days that I normally would work, even if I have a lighter load than usual, if I would be out of the house, I'm still acting as if I'm working, and I am working.

Marina Blake: I've given myself... I've made a list of things, all the things that I want to do in my practice and I'm going through that list and I'm not treating the extra time that we're both in the same house as an extended weekend because that will destroy any sense of peace that we have in the house. There's such a thing as too much togetherness, you know?

Erica Hanlon: Yeah.

Marina Blake: We're not... most of us aren't used to being around our partners 24/7. At the end of the day, what do you... how was your day? Well, you were right there. It gives you nothing to talk about. So do something other than be with your partner for the time that you normally would be away from your partner.

Erica Hanlon: Right. Yeah. I'm also an extrovert, married to an introvert, in fact. Sort of at the end of the night sometimes, we'll be watching television after the kids have gone to bed and he'll look at me and he'll say, "Don't you want to go to bed? Aren't you tired?" And I'm like, "No, I'm fine." And I finally caught on that this is his way of saying, "I need my alone time. You need to go away. You need to go to bed so I can have my alone time." And we've been working... he's been working at home more. I always pretty much work from home but we have different areas of the house and actually I feel like I still see him probably about the same amount as I usually do because we're in different areas of the house, both doing our own thing. So I think it is helpful.

Marina Blake: Well, I've been to your house and your house is about four times the size of my house.

Erica Hanlon: I know. I've been to your house too.

Marina Blake: It's not like you live in a mansion. I'm not saying that. But we have a pretty small house. It's like 900 square feet, and there's basically three rooms. And we just... our space isn't so much physical as it is mental. We're just not interacting a lot. I'll go in once in a while and give him a little hug, but it's like maybe every two hours or something, and then I leave. I don't engage a whole lot.

Marina Blake: We are taking... once a day, we're taking what I'm calling sanity walks. And that's been really helpful for me. Probably a little bit helpful for him, but more helpful for me. Yesterday he was telling me we're on our daily sanity walk and he was saying, "You really need these." And I said, "Well, how can you tell?" And he said, "Because the minute I get..." He's a late sleeper, so he's like, "As soon after I get up, you're like, you want to go for a walk? How about now? You want to go for a walk now? You want to go for a walk in about half an hour? Will you be ready in half an hour?" Apparently he's noticed I really, really need these daily walks.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah, going a little stir crazy, got to get out. COVID-19 is creating all of this new stress, right? We've got the stress of what's going on in the news, the stress in our communities, everything's different, stress at home. What do you tend to see in the couples that you work with when relationships are faced with stress?

Marina Blake: It doesn't tend to be positive for people's relationships. Studies have shown that increased stress decreases functioning in general because everybody has a certain amount of internal resources, patience, organization, resilience, these are not unlimited resources. And so when some of those resources are being used up trying to cope with the stress, then that's less resources that you can devote to self care, to parenting, to interacting with your partner to work. I wouldn't be surprised if work productivity goes down as well. It's just using these resources to cope, it's... there's a cost there. And I'm working with a number of couples who are doing teletherapy and for some people it's a very natural process and for other people it's more uncomfortable, but there's a lot more snippiness, there's more arguments. Couples who typically avoid conflict are avoiding it even more. So whatever sort of the unhealthy coping mechanism is in the relationship, it's just exacerbated.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. So it's like the same stuff, but just... I don't want to say worse, but worse.

Marina Blake: But worse. Yeah. If people tend to argue when they're stressed out, or when they're sleep deprived, or when there's any kind of stressor in their life, then they're going to argue more. And couples who don't argue at all, they're going to get more and more distant.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. What would you recommend for couples right now?

Marina Blake: Oh, one, try to do what we're doing and that's, do not treat this period of time as an extended weekend or a vacation. This is not a vacation. When

you're on vacation it tends to be some kind of wonderful time, which is great, but this is not a vacation. And so keep working. Even if you're having... even if you've had a job loss and you don't... you're not able to work, or you have a job where you can't work remotely. Okay. Maybe it's time for a house project. Maybe it's time for some gardening. Maybe it's time to paint a room, or learn a language, or do a personal goal. So that's one thing is keep yourself as busy as you can so that you're not in your partner's hair and they're not in your hair. Right?

Erica Hanlon: Yeah.

Marina Blake: So that's one thing I would recommend. The other is really try to stay in touch with your friends and your family. I'm not talking social media. A lot of social media, it's like there's a barrier between you and the other person. It's not very real. And I would say old fashioned telephone or video chat would be great. Those are some methods that can actually help you connect with people. Studies show that upon using social media, people often get more... have more depression symptoms rather than less and they'd feel less connected versus more. And so I would say old fashioned telephone would be a better way to stay in contact.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. And why is it so important to get that connection right now even if you have another person in your house?

Marina Blake: Absolutely. Because it's a burden on your partner to try to meet all your social needs with that one person. It's not how we evolved. It's not how we're made. And we evolved in a tribe and we need more than one person. Imagine you, whoever the listener, imagine any person trying to meet all their social needs through you personally, are you not feeling exhausted yet? That's just sounds exhausting to me. So the more needs you can meet outside of the relationship, the easier it will be on the relationship. Does that make sense?

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. You're not just depending just on that one person, you're spreading the butter over multiple slices of bread as opposed to just putting the whole stick on one piece of bread. It's just going to fall right through.

Marina Blake: Yeah. That's an interesting analogy. But yes, I totally get it.

Erica Hanlon: Let's talk a minute about parenting because some couples, they're at home. It's not just the two of them, they also have these little ones

running around. Can you speak a little bit to parenting with your partner because there's a lot more of that going on too.

Marina Blake: Oh yeah. It's... I don't have children myself, so I'm not an expert on being a parent, so I won't claim that at all, but I am an expert on helping parents be more of a team to each other. In some ways it's a little bit like triage if you're both tearing your hair out because the kids are misbehaving because the kids are tired, the kids are stressed out, the kids are picking up on your stress and the kids are outside of their schedule, which is a total terrible situation for them. When they're outside their schedule, they just melt down. This is what I've observed. Like adults but way worse. If you're both tearing your hair out, who's tearing their hair out worse? And that's the person who gets a break. Even if it's just for 10 minutes, there'll be afraid to tell the other parent.

Marina Blake: If you see that they're really struggling and they're getting to the point where they're going to snap and maybe yell at the kids, or hit the kids, or whatever, then say, "Hey, hey, I'll take them for a couple of minutes. Why don't you go take a walk around the block?" It's... you could call it a tap out, or a timeout, or... adult timeouts are totally a thing. They're a thing and it's actually really, really good role modeling for the kids for a parent to just say directly, "You know what? Daddy or mommy needs a timeout." kids, they're like, "Oh yeah, okay." They get it.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. We're seeing on our end, because I have three, we're seeing definitely an uptick. Just this week we're on week two really of quarantine or at least social distancing and stay at home order and my youngest, we've seen a real uptick in tantrums. She'll say no, she melts down, she's falling on the ground where we didn't really have that before. We're seeing a regression and... but I have found that tap outs are really helpful in helping diffuse those situations because kids will push your buttons, they will push buttons that you never thought you had.

Marina Blake: Oh, they're masters.

Erica Hanlon: They will find them.

Marina Blake: They'll make them.

Erica Hanlon: They'll be like, "Oh, you don't have a button here. I'm going to make one for you. I'm going to really make you crazy. I'm going to make you tell me to put on my shoes 10 or 20 times." Like what? What's that? Why?

Marina Blake: Yeah, I recommend, and the way that I was parented, which my mother was a phenomenal parent, she had a very shallow bottom line. What I mean by that is she would say, "Put on your shoes." And then she would say it again, "Put on your shoes." And then she would say a third time, "I told you to put on your shoes, you're not putting on your shoes. You now have two choices. You're either going to put on your shoes or you're going to get this consequence." And she never... it was never 10 times that she told us. And that reduced her frustration with us because we were like, "Well, we can put it on our shoes or we can get the consequence. All right, I'll put on my shoes."

Erica Hanlon: That's so good.

Marina Blake: Most of the time it worked, not all the time, but if you have a really shallow bottom line, it can really reduce frustration. And right now with the amount of stress, there probably is going to be an uptick and unfortunately child abuse and neglect as well as domestic violence because the stress that we're currently under is bad for relationships. It's bad for families, it's bad for parenting skills, it's just... it's really... it's a tough time.

Erica Hanlon: That's a really good point and I think at the end of today's podcast we will reference some hotlines and some numbers you can call if that's an issue for you to get some support.

Marina Blake: Yeah.

Erica Hanlon: Do you... Outside of that tap out when you see your partner getting upset, whether the conflict is... and frustration is with the children or with your partner, do you have any other tips about diffusing those conflicts and those arguments when they're happening?

Marina Blake: Yeah. The way that our brains work is that our brains can't tell the difference between a threat to our life, like somebody pulling a gun on us, and an emotional threat such as our partner yelling at us. Our brain does the identical same thing in both cases and it shuts off the front part of our brain, which is the part that actually thinks and has impulse control. And that's the part that we really need in an argument too... so that we don't say that thing that we want to say. And unfortunately that's the part that goes away. And so those timeouts are absolutely essential. The other thing that I tell people is that if you're fighting for five minutes, that's long enough, don't let it go for 15, or 30, or some couples can go hours and hours. And that just sounds so exhausting to me. And so-

Erica Hanlon: That reminds me of my relationships in college. My college relationships where you'd stay up all night long shouting and hashing things out and fighting. It was... yeah.

Marina Blake: That's... you're tiring me out. It sounds exhausting. You might have had more intense relationships than I did.

Erica Hanlon: Maybe. Maybe.

Marina Blake: I remember that a couple of times, but not as a frequent thing. So just stopping the argument, it only takes one person to stop it. And if your partner says, "Hey, you know what? I need a break or I need this to stop," then let them do that. Do not follow them around the house trying to engage them. You're being a stalker if you do that. And so stop that. Another thing that you can do is as best you can try to keep in mind that just as you are super annoyed with them, or you're angry with them, or you're frustrated with them, they probably feel the same way about you, that you're actually having the same experience at that moment.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah, it's not just them. You can be annoying too.

Marina Blake: I can be super annoying. Yes.

Erica Hanlon: You're not perfect. You're not always right. It's not always them. Sometimes it's you.

Marina Blake: That's one of my strengths I feel is I can absolutely admit it's definitely me sometimes. Maybe more than half the time. It's possible.

Erica Hanlon: What do you feel are the signs that maybe a couple should seek help? That maybe the conflict is more than just something that they should try and push through.

Marina Blake: Conflict fundamentally is just a disagreement. Say we want to have dinner and I want Italian and you want Chinese, that's a conflict. And so conflict in and of itself is not a bad word or a bad experience. There can be conflict that is productive and healthy, and then there can be conflict that is unproductive and unhealthy. If it's damaging the relationship and it's out of control, that's definitely a time to seek therapy is if you're part of a couple that's really volatile and any little thing will set the other one off or set you off. That's one reason you might want to seek therapy. A big one is if you feel resentful. A lot of the time, resentment is a really key emotion that is a sign of problems. And what it means most of the time,

if you're feeling resentful, is that your emotional needs are not being met.

Marina Blake: And that's really a reason to seek out some therapy, couples therapy specifically. If you feel like you have to walk on eggshells, like you can't, "Ooh, I can't bring up this topic because it's going to set them off, or they're going to give me the silent treatment, or whatever," that's another reason to seek therapy. Or if there's just no emotional connection. Some couples are not volatile, some couples are... just can't connect. They don't fight, they don't interact at all. And that's another reason. It's actually... I want to give your listeners some hope. Most couples do fight, and that's actually more hopeful because when couples come in to my office and they've been having a lot of unproductive conflict, I'm more hopeful for them because they're still interacting. When they come in and they're like, "We never talk at all," I'm like, "Ooh!" It's actually harder to build a connection that isn't there versus repair a connection that's damaged.

Erica Hanlon: Wow. Okay. That's really interesting. And I know some couples are together for a really long time. Right. And I liked that you said that conflict is normal and that happens. And what are some other things that are... you might describe as being just part of the ebb and flow of a relationship that people can expect and say, "Okay, this is healthy and this is okay."

Marina Blake: Yeah, there's definitely an ebb and flow in long term relationships. You can't stay in that in love period. One of the most fascinating things to me about the in love phase, it's called luminescence, is that your brain produces a huge amount of dopamine, which is the same chemical that your brain releases when you use cocaine. And so you are literally on drugs when you're in love, and just like you can't really stay in love for 48 years. You can't really use cocaine all the time for 48 years and have it turn out really well either. And so... it does come to an end. Not to be cynical, I'm not being cynical because there's moments people might feel that in love thing and think, "Ooh." And then they have that really warm hearted experience for a period of time.

Erica Hanlon: I'm a high on love baby.

Marina Blake: Well in love is great. Being in love is a wonderful human experience. That is, I hope everyone gets to feel it at some point in their lives and that really intense part of it isn't really sustainable for five, 10, 30, 40 years. You might have moments where you have that feeling again, but it's just

not... Don't expect to go into a relationship expecting that that initial awe feeling that you have is going to last forever because it's just not sustainable. It's too intense.

Erica Hanlon: Right. Yeah. And nothing's gone wrong. Nothing's gone wrong. They're not feeling that.

Marina Blake: No, not at all. Nothing has gone wrong. And so the ebb and flow of relationships is, it's very normal when you have a long term relationship that you have periods of time where you feel much closer and then it's periods of time where you feel not as close. And that is normal. Where you're just going along to your day to day thing and it's just... it's doesn't seem like a big deal. That's perfectly normal and fine. What would be more problematic and maybe seek out professional help is if you're totally disconnected, that's different.

Erica Hanlon: Okay. And what does being totally disconnected tend to look like?

Marina Blake: Like you're living with a roommate, you don't particularly like.

Erica Hanlon: Oh, okay. So it's like my husband and I are sitting on the couch and we're both on our own phones and we're not like... we're together but we're not hanging out, that's not nothing to be concerned about.

Marina Blake: Right. If you're like ships passing in the night and you don't really have any kind of meaningful communication every day, or... Most couples if they see each other during the day, healthy couples are going to have some kind of meaningful communication every single day. Even if it's just, "Hey, tell me about your day, and I want to hear about that phone call that you had." Or, "How did that meeting go?" Or, "Your boss was hard on you. How do you feel about that?" Those are meaningful conversations. If all you're talking about is the kids and that's it, or conflict, then that's not normal. That's not healthy, I should say. It might be normal for your relationship, but it's not optimal for the... it's not healthy.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. Okay. Why is right now, in the midst of a pandemic, maybe the perfect time to see a couples therapist?

Marina Blake: Well, you might need it more than usual. Seriously, it's a time of stress and if your relationship was a little bit rocky to begin with, this is going to put extra strain on it. And if you have the resources to see a couples therapist and you guys are struggling, this would be a perfect time

because if you're getting too much of each other, you could say, then you have the time to work on the relationship. It's an ironic thing. You're getting too much of each other and that's causing problems. But it could also be the solution to the problems if you get the right help.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. And what does the right help look like? What should somebody look for when they're searching for a couples therapist? Because like I'm an... I am a licensed professional counselor and so are you. We both technically have the same credentials, but I don't have any training and working with couples.

Marina Blake: Yeah, it's a little bit like if you're having a heart condition, you might technically be allowed to go to a podiatrist because they're both medical doctors. But you probably wouldn't want to be treated for your heart condition by a podiatrist. I would probably not. Although technically it's allowed. Right. And it's the same thing in counseling that people can get a degree in community counseling and have very, very little or no training whatsoever in couples and family and they're told you can do couples and family. And it's really important to be an educated consumer and know what questions to ask. Some of the questions to ask are, what training do you have in couples therapy specifically? What model of couples therapy do you use? And they should be able to tell you what the model is and describe it to you. Ask what supervision have you had in couples therapy?

Marina Blake: I not only have a degree in marriage and family therapy, but I also had supervision in couples therapy so that I could become more competent in it. What extra certifications do you have or what extra training have you received after your master's degree in couples therapy? How often do you see couples? If somebody sees... 90% of their practice is seeing individuals and 10% is seeing couples, that says something about their expertise. If 50% of their practice is seeing couples, that's a better percentage. They're doing a lot more of it. And they're probably... it's a focus. You want to go to somebody that that is their focus is not just individual but is couples therapy.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. And I know if people are looking for a therapist, they have a few different avenues, right? They can call their employee assistance program or call their insurance company and find somebody who's in that work for them and they can say, "I want somebody who does couples therapy. This is what I'm looking for." But it is important to follow up and ask those questions because somebody could have just checked a box when they were submitting to be in the network. So it's important

to have that interview. And also the connection matters too. You want to make sure it's a good fit personality wise as well.

Marina Blake: Well, it's funny if I have a client and I do see adult individuals as well, probably it's 30... 20 to 30% of my practice is individuals. The rest is couples. But I'm not always... if somebody comes into my office, just because they've picked my name off of a list doesn't mean we're going to have a love connection and I could be a fantastic therapist, but not necessarily a fantastic therapist for them. The connection is really, really important. The client has to feel comfortable, the client has to feel safe, the client has to like the therapist and feel like the therapist is competent. That's really important. And with couples it's even more important because you don't have to be a match for one person. You have to be a match for both people. So if a couple comes in... and I tell people very upfront, if one of you loves me and the other one hates me, it's not going to work because the person who hates me is never going to open up. Both people have to feel comfortable and safe with me.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. That's so important.

Marina Blake: Super, super important.

Erica Hanlon: This was really great. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day and out of the pandemic to jump on here and talk about relationships. I think there's a lot of really helpful information here about relationships in general and then to talk about the specific stressors of COVID-19 and being at home with your partner a whole lot. Can you tell everyone where they can find you if they would want to talk to you some more or get some more information?

Marina Blake: Yes. Well, first thank you so much for having me on the podcast. It's been super fun and really have enjoyed talking about all this really important stuff, so thank you for that. People can contact me through my telephone and that is (720) 509-9180, and phone and text are fine with that. Or they can contact me and check me out through my website, which is marinablakecounseling.com, that's M-A-R-I-N-A-B-L-A-K-E counseling with one I.com. I'm private pay, I am doing telehealth right now and I can take clients in Colorado and Alaska because that's where I am licensed.

Erica Hanlon: Awesome. All right. Well thanks Marina.

Marina Blake: Thank you.

Erica Hanlon: I think a big takeaway here is that if you're struggling in your relationship with your partner, help is available. You can go through your employee assistance program, you can go through your insurance provider, go to websites like Psychology Today to find a therapist who specializes in couples. But if you are having a situation that needs more than therapy, where there are safety risks, there is abuse taking place, the National Domestic Violence Hotline is a really great resource. You can go to their website on thehotline.org, that's T-H-E-H-O-T-L-I-N-E dot org, or you can also call them at 1-800-799-7233. Take care everybody.

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