

Improve Your relationship with Your Parenting Partner Podcast -
Part 1

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello. I'm Annmarie McMahon with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University and this is the ParentingMontana.org Podcast.

In this ParentingMontana.org Podcast, we'll be talking about intentional ways to grow a healthy relationship with your parenting partner. As parents, we want to be at our best for our children. I've learned that if I want to be at my best, I need to take care of my own health and wellbeing and that includes learning ways to improve my relationship with my parenting partner.

TOM BURKE:

And if we can do this as a team, if we can be on the same page most of the time, if we can forgive each other, encourage each other, mentor each other, in the end I think the experience of raising those children is going to be incredibly invaluable to who we are as people and a couple.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Many of us experience changes in our relationship when we become parents, a child can bring about positive changes, there might be a new and different level of connection. A child can bring about some strains too, less sleep, less time to talk, less time to spend together. We might find ourselves disagreeing more, we might not have the energy to sort out the differences as they arise. Intentionally growing a healthy relationship with your parenting partner means that we are nurturing and strengthening our relationship, often by figuring out ways to communicate in a way that deepens our intimacy.

I'd like to introduce our guests for today's podcast, Tom and Mary Frances Burke. Together they've been married for 42 years.

TOM BURKE:

Well thank you for help bringing us on.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Perfect. And Steve and Debbie Robbins, they have been married 37 years.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

Thanks Annmarie for inviting us.

STEVE ROBBINS:

It's a pleasure to be here with you.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And also introduce father Tom Ogg, who has been a priest for 54 years.

FR. TOM OGG:

It's a real pleasure to be here and I'll try to be careful with my enthusiasm.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So together they have over 100 of working together with couples to help them listen and share and connect more deeply in their relationships. They'll be sharing valuable insights today on ways to grow in their relationships. So welcome everyone, thanks for being here. Thank

FR. TOM OGG:

You're welcome.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So as parents, taking care of our own health and wellbeing is essential when trying to be at our best for our kids. We know that if you're in a stressful relationship, it can really degrade your own health and wellbeing, but being in a healthy relationship can really promote our health. So growing healthy relationships with our parenting partners is a skill that we can learn and develop over time. So to start with, what do you consider to be the foundation of a healthy relationship?

FR. TOM OGG:

A healthy relationship includes lots of things. What a basic element to a relationship is trust. "Do we trust each other? Do we rely on each other? Do we depend on each other?" That's one of the factors. Do we like somebody? That makes a difference too. And if we do, we have to learn how to communicate it so that the other person can get the idea that, "I like you," or, "I appreciate you." It's not just about in general, it has to be very specific in a marriage relationship, in a partner relationship

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think for us learning to communicate at a little bit deeper level. We're used to having just the chit chat, "How was your day? How are the kids doing?" That kind of thing. And in order to deepen our relationship, we had to learn to deepen our communication, which really brought us down to talking about our hopes and dreams and how are we

feeling about things, because we often think differently than we feel. So let me just give you a quick example. I come home from work and I'm kind of crabby as I'm working on dinner, Steve comes in and says, "Hi, how was your day?" And I'm like, rah, rah, rah." Well, that can impact our communication for the whole rest of the evening. So me being aware of how I'm feeling really can help me choose how to communicate more effectively with Steve.

TOM BURKE:

And I think when there are more difficult circumstances that we come across, say a difficult issue in parenting or something going on in our relationship with finances or ill health, when we're stressed, knowing how to communicate with feelings lets us really understand who our partner is. And if we can get a window into the partner and really understand what it's like to be them, it allows us to show empathy and compassion, and that builds our relationship. And it makes us a stronger partner.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So when you are talking about being specific and what I'm hearing the others say, is a lot of times at the basis of that is feelings, but I am not great at figuring out what I'm feeling, let alone being able to communicate it. That feels like a starting point? What advice can you give me there?

FR. TOM OGG:

What is a feeling? And the understanding or the definition, if you will, that I like is an inner, spontaneous reaction to something outside, to another person, another situation, to an event, something outside ourselves, but it's an inner, spontaneous reaction. And if I have that that frees me up for lots of things so that I can talk about it, I can fuss about it, I can do whatever, and not be hurting anybody. It's me, my insides.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I think when we accept the basic tenet that feelings just happen. We don't choose to feel angry, we don't choose to feel happy, we just are. We have a good friend who says, "Feelings are like a sneeze," it just happens. And I think when we accept that basic tenet, we can let down our defenses and talk in a more civil, polite, understanding way about the situation, we're much less likely to be defensive and angry, "Well, you shouldn't feel that way," or, "I didn't make you feel that way," or, "That's not my problem, that's your problem, fix it."

Many of us weren't raised though to talk about our feelings, to even acknowledge that we have feelings and to share those feelings. I can think back to my childhood and being told, "You can't be lonely, you've got four brothers and sisters, "Or don't be angry. I don't want to hear you slamming your door again." We're doing the best we can. Later on in school I was told, "I don't care what you feel, I want to know what you think." So it's something that as adults, we have to learn how to accept our feelings and put a name on them.

TOM BURKE:

It gets even a little more complicated because one of the ways of trying to define feelings is, well, what aren't they? And if we look at say versus thoughts, our language is confusing, because lots of people will say, "I feel that it's going to be a good day," or, "I feel that this is a good candidate for an election," and those are not feelings, those are actually judgements. And so we've learned over time that if you differentiate our own language, typically if we're using the word, that, after a feeling, word, then it's not a feeling. And so going back to what Father Tom said about it being a spontaneous inner reaction, feelings are not thoughts and they're not judgements. And this becomes crucial because when we're trying to communicate to another person and really trying to let them know who we are, feelings reveal the inner experience of us. Thoughts basically reveal how we've interpreted our reality.

And so having that differentiation is really helpful in trying to be real with each other, which is ultimately what's helps a person to really fall in love, to really see the other person who they are and not just all the opinions about something. And again, this can happen real quickly in a situation where, again, if there's some chaos going on, there's a mess in the room or something like that, you can suddenly hear yourself saying, "Well, you always," or, "You never," and those kinds of things are fighting words, we're off to gather the troops at that point. So if one stops and tries to assess what they're feeling and tries to communicate that, or when decompressing the situation later does that, it's a way of really helping to build the trust that you were talking about. And it also helps in liking the other person too. And when we share our feelings, it's a lot easier to like each other.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think for me, recognizing that feelings are a spontaneous reaction that I have no control over and they're going to happen whether I want them to happen or not, was really freeing for me, because I learned a lot about myself. And then when I started to share at that level with Steve and learn about his feelings, we may be both really excited about going on a vacation together, but as we start delving into, well, the day before, "What am I feeling?" It may be very different than what he's feeling, even though our thoughts are, "We're still ready to go on this vacation together."

And so I think exploring feelings, learning about myself, first of all, to identify feelings, was really important, because I couldn't name them. I grew up in a house that the only feeling we ever showed was anger. And so I didn't know what anything outside of frustration, anger, that kind of feeling was. So I had to really start learning how to even name what I was feeling, and then start to be able to explain that to Steve and care about what he was feeling and understand why it might be different than what I'm feeling, because his experiences in life are different than mine.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And like Debbie, just understanding feelings, but admitting that you have him. I can recall dad watching when Old Yeller died and he claimed he had an allergy or something in his eye, he wasn't going to admit that he actually felt sorrow for the dog dying. So just admitting and recognizing your own feelings is a huge step in that part of communication.

TOM BURKE:

There's another way I think as we're talking about the difference between feelings and thoughts, and this is something that we've used over the years, it's really helpful, is that if I say, I think, in a sentence and it makes sense, then that's a thought. If I say, I feel, and the sentence doesn't make sense, then chances are I've said a thought or a judgment. And so learning this over time helps. And what we've found is that sharing our feelings with each other really helps us to learn how to make these differences. And even after doing this for many years, there are times where I may get into my thoughts and judgments and not be really sharing my feelings. And so being in a situation where we can say, "That doesn't sound like a feeling, tell me what's going on underneath that," can really make a difference as far as bringing that out.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I think for me too, it's very helpful for me to have a pen in hand when I'm talking about my feelings. I can much more easily access my feelings and describe them, be more honest, I think, in sharing them in a loving way if I'm writing them down. Somehow that written word records it and it allows me to access probably a different part of my brain, than when I'm just talking. I'm married to a husband who is rather verbose and so writing things down also levels the playing field. I can get my thoughts and my feelings and my descriptions out there ahead of time. And it doesn't have to be anything fancy, it's been on a napkin.

I remember once we were up at the cabin with all five of our kids and we were talking about tearing down the deck on the front of the cabin and rebuilding it. And the kids got into a bit of a tiff as to who was going to be in charge and who was going to be doing what and how it was going to be working. And one of our kids said, "I think we need to just call it a quit here and let's get some pencil and paper and let's write down what's going on inside of us right now, and come to a safe realization in a way of rebuilding this deck where mom and dad can leave and know that we're going to be adults up here and nobody's going to get hurt." It was pretty amazing when they pulled out paper plates and sharpened some pencils and everybody wrote and read.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I love all of this. And I have this wealth of relationship aspiration sitting at the table with me today. And I'm thinking, the way all of these relationships you have in your lives, I think I desire that for myself, but when my kids are little, I remember it being a victory to shower for the day. And so that is the truth. And you had dinner that didn't come in a cardboard box, that was another victory. So how do you find the space as a parent, as a new parent or... I mean, now I have a kid that's a teenager, the time challenge, they're

the same because she's so social, I can't ever manage to keep track of all of her relationships, but how do you find the time or how do you create this intentionality to stop and figure out my own feelings, let alone being able to share them with your parenting partner?

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think I go back to when our kids were little and we were starting to learn about this type of communication and we were starting practice. And we would give the kids, while we were making dinner, we'd give them a question about, "How did you feel about school today?" Or something like that. And they'd draw a picture. And then they would tell us about the picture at dinner, over dinner. And so we had to make some intentional choices to put our family first because we thought the best thing we can do for our children is to give them a loving... Show them what a loving relationship, a forgiving relationship is. And so in order to do that, in order to help them grow up, being able to love and forgive, we had to model that behavior. And we did it oftentimes over the dinner table. So making sure we had a little bit of time to ourselves before that, helped us to be able to communicate at dinner better.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And I think, Annmarie, you hit it on the head. It's the intentional time set aside. So it's prioritizing, what's what's most important in your day? Is it going to be family? Is it going to be work? Sitting down without the cardboard box for supper? Making that intentional time and being together.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I know after dinner, we, Tom and I, always did the dishes together and we never made our kids participate in doing the dishes. And it was a decision that we made, that was our time together to talk. And the kids, if their homework was done, they had TV time, if their homework wasn't done, that was homework time. And that was our time in the kitchen to visit.

TOM BURKE:

So we use this technique called dialogue, which actually encompasses a lot of what we've been talking about, where we will write our initial thoughts and judgments about a question, and then what our feelings are about the situation. And the idea is that we only spend about 10 minutes in this writing and then we spend about 10 minutes sharing our feeling. And typically we take just one feeling and really try to get to the root of it so that we can understand what it's like to be the other person with that feeling, that's really the goal.

This 20 minutes a day has been a fabulous thing for us to make sure that we know who each other is. And particularly when the circumstances in our life are changing or are tumultuous, it's really, really helpful to have that base. And so coming back to your question about the chaos of... Just the speed that parenting little children takes, it's very, very hard to be on the playing field with them because they're so fast and they're

constantly moving, and it's one thing to the next. And I think that if one's able to decompress some of their feelings about that, I might walk into a room and see a room full of toys that are a mess. And I might be thinking, "Oh my gosh, look at the mess." And Mary Frances might walk by and go, "Oh, this is great, there's no blood on the floor." And we just have a different way of approaching it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I still think though... I'm hearing you and it's like you have a PhD in relationships and PhD in feelings. And so I want to just push a little bit to boil it down. How do you even get there to find the intentional space to do that, Father Tom?

FR. TOM OGG:

One little piece of this big puzzle is this whole idea of feelings. They are not right or wrong. That's something that was really hard for me to grasp because I was taught as a little kid, "Don't be angry, don't feel bad, don't feel ticked off at anybody." And I'm thinking, "Wait a minute, I was ticked off. I did feel this way." And then to learn that that's okay, it's okay to have a feeling of any kind, positive or negative, so that we're okay with that. Now that to me was a huge revelation.

And I do know a lot of adults that I relate with and sometimes counsel, where that's a stumbling block, just that one thing of saying, "You shouldn't feel that way." And I'm thinking, "But I do feel that way." And it's okay to be a, you were talking about healthy relationships, well, we have to allow that feelings are not in that realm of unhealthy, quite the opposite. It's just saying, "Wow, thank God we have feelings." I think they're gifts, they're not something that we asked for or we inherited, we inherited by being human.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I was going to say the other thing I think that really helps is to understand that they're... We typically talk about four different categories of feelings, happy, angry, sad, fearful, and there are lots of different feelings underneath those four subheadings. And when you're saying, "Well, I feel happy about this." And as your spouse might say, "Well, tell me a little bit more about happy. Is it kind of an excited, happy feeling or is it delightful? Is it peaceful?" And you can break those feelings down and get into a more specific description. Tom might feel happy about a situation and I might feel happy about the same situation, but those two happy feelings as we proceeded to describe it, maybe totally, totally different. Mine maybe more delightful, like a little girl on a party dress spinning and twirling, maybe like cotton candy or like birds singing on a bird bath, and Tom's happy feeling might be totally different in description.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think one of the things I still do, even after many years of trying to communicate on a feelings level is I still once in a while will blame Steve from my feeling, "Well, you made me so mad about this," and he'll stop me and he'll say, "So you're upset. Is that right? Yes. I'm mad. Well, tell me about, what's this mad. Is this like the fire poking, 'I want to

lash out at you mad,' or is this, 'I'm just really irritated at this?'" It goes back to what Mary Frances said, sometimes there are just so many different words to use in each of those categories that you have to kind of stop. I have to stop and say, "Okay, what does this feel like? How intense is this? When have I felt like this before so that I can give some comparison to Steve."

But I love it when I say "Gosh, you made me feel." And he just laughs at me and he goes, "Okay, so you feel this," he puts it back on me, because it is, it's about me, I can't speak for his feelings and he can't really speak for mine. And he didn't cause my feeling. We go back to, it's a spontaneous inner reaction, it happened to me, it's my feeling and I have to own it. And once I can start to do that, then it can really help us more easily communicate about those feelings because there's not a blame, it's not right or wrong as Father Tom said, it just is.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

And another nuance about what Deb just shared is that sometimes we'll say, "I feel sad because," and it's kind of that subtly having to justify your feeling rather than just accepting that I feel sad and that's okay. Everybody else around me might be bubbly in a totally different celebratory mood and it's okay to just feel sad.

TOM BURKE:

I think what it really comes down to is not so much study, as practice. And I think that when one works at something, when you discover it's important and you recognize the benefits you can get out of communicating this way, then one wants to learn how to do it better. And it's like anything in life, if we practice it is something that we can get a lot better at. And what Mary Frances just said about having a set of feelings that's different than everybody else, perhaps in the same environment that's experiencing this completely differently, it tends to isolate us. And we tend to make a lot of self-judgments about ourself, "I'm broken, I'm a mess," or whatever. And being able to communicate that is almost like a lifeline where your partner at that point can say, "Hey, this is your set of feelings and we have time to sit down and talk about this. We have times to sort this out."

The question that Debbie threw out about, "When did I feel this way before?" Is a way of identifying, it's a way of saying, "No, you're human and I'm human and we are on the same level, I've been through this." And that kind of a connection is so powerful, it gets back to what Father Tom said, the element of this, of trust, that when you know that your partner has experienced something similar, then you can really begin to share and unpack it.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

Well, and that I love you all the more for having shared that. I love you all the more for being you and for experiencing the sadness.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And I think the growth in the relationship between parenting partners, but also self-growth. Just understanding yourself a little bit more and realizing what makes me tick. I've learned a tremendous amount of with Deb and I in our relationship the past years, but I am not the person that I thought I was. And just understanding and gaining that knowledge has been a tremendous gift for myself and our relationship.

FR. TOM OGG:

And I think you're better than you think you are. And I think spouses often do that too, that we see the goodness in the other person better than they see it in themselves. And that's life giving in its own way, as Tom said, it helps the connection, the bonding, the emotional closeness, if we can articulate that, if we can acknowledge it, admit it, not be afraid of who I am, even if I'm feeling terrible, even if I'm feeling something very negative and strongly so. And we can all fill in the words what that would be, there's plenty of them, that we use too often about the negative side of feelings, but the positive is equally so.

TOM BURKE:

I would add on that, Annmarie, that getting to know each other on this level is a blast, it's really like dating in the beginning. You bring back that wonder of that attraction that you had to that person. And so if you look at the really successful athlete, for example, who has really conquered a skill, chances are they're really enjoying that and they're really liking it. The short stop that has the phenomenal range that can make that play time after time again, and so maybe this business of sharing feelings on a daily basis is a way of fielding grounders over and over and over, and becoming skilled at knowing how to relate. And getting back to this trust issue, I think Mary Frances tends to rely on me, in a situation like this well, she'll say "He's going to field that grounder, he's going to handle this."

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

And when you're communicating intimately on a level of sharing feelings, that not only influences your communication, it influences your relationship, you grow and your love, but it influences your sexuality. It influences all of what goes in to make your relationship special.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So if a parent was listening to this podcast today and said, "Yes, I want, I want this kind of intimacy. I want to have a relationship based on feelings." What advice would you give to that parent to engage their parenting partner, an invitation to this type of feelings-based relationship?

FR. TOM OGG:

I'd like to give a framework for that. I think what you said is wonderful, but every relationship I'm aware of goes through stages and that's critical. And that first stage we could call romance, it's when you enjoy each other, you like each other, you do things together, you want to be together. All those things, you want to know this person better, that's the romance piece of it. Everybody to my knowledge goes through that at some point or another. Then there's always that disillusion that there's always that next step of saying, "Oops, is this the person I know? Whether you're married or not already, usually you are, because romance leads to intimacy in its own way, physical intimacy, for sure, and most likely emotional intimacy, which is I think a big plan, that's part of who we are.

But then that disillusionment can get in the way and if we get stuck there, then we're in real trouble. And so the whole idea of sharing feelings is the best way, I found, how to get out of that for me, how to recognize when I'm not happy, when I'm not feeling good about me or good about you know, the other person. That's when I look inside and say, "Okay, so what's what's happening here?" And then I can come through that, and Debbie mentioned a key to doing that, which is forgiveness. That's pretty basic in our lives. Nobody's perfect and nobody has to be perfect. In fact, it's a privilege not to be, so I don't have to work so hard at trying to be what I can't be.

And so with forgiveness as one method of getting back on right relationship, to admit my limitation or my brokenness is ultimately a gift, but we go back and then what happens can be joy, so that's that big framework. And I suspect that people in our lives go through those stages all the time. So sometimes we are in that romantic stage, sometimes we're in struggle, disillusionment, disappointment, the nitty gritty of life, which is often I suspect. But then remember that there's an end game here, joy, that deep awareness that, "I'm okay, that I'm a good person that that's who I am. I was made this way and I have a right to be happy, a right to be at peace."

And that joy is what lasts that's what hangs on and pulls us through those times of disillusionment. That we don't have to be stuck where wherever we are, we can be better than where we are, and I think that's what I see. In my lived experiences too often people, and I'm jumping to another area, I suppose, but do we really like ourselves? Do we love ourselves? And my understanding of life is that we ought to. We're made for goodness, for joy, for love. And so it's a bigger than just this, but this is means, as I see it, this whole idea of feelings is a wonderful means to get to a good place inside and then in our relationships.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I want to jump on something Father Tom just said. The three stages, romance, disillusionment, and joy. Absolutely, we go through those over and over and over in our marriage, but it's so easy to get stuck in disappointment, to get stuck in the nitty gritty of every day. And so in order to get out of that nitty gritty and back into the joy and the romance, is a decision. It's a decision that I have to make. It's a decision when I'm angry at Steve to forgive him and heal that hurt. Sometimes it's a decision when I'm the one who has been to blame to accept his love and move on.

We like to call it a decision to love, that every day I have to make a decision to love him and to put him at the center of my life and forgive and heal and accept him and accept myself in the way that I am. And in being able to do that, I don't know how you could do that if you aren't aware of what's going on inside of you, if you aren't aware of how you are feeling about things. And being able to communicate at that level really does help you to be able to heal those hurts, the big ones and the little ones, because you don't want the little ones to just build up to become big ones. But if I don't make that decision to love him and to accept his love every day, then we get stuck in that area of disappointment.

TOM BURKE:

I really like your question of someone maybe sitting there listening to this going, "Yeah, this kind of sounds good, but how do I get there?" And I would just say, going back to the person who's well practiced at a skill, it doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it's helpful to have a mentor or someone that you can look up to, you can say, "That couple really knows what they're doing. I think I'll hang out with them a little bit. I might even ask them a few questions and maybe we can become friends. Maybe I could decompress the situation of where I didn't do a good job of parenting or a good job of respecting my partner or inviting them into the parenting so that we could work together and not be just totally relying on our own reflexes."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, understanding and recognizing these three stages - romance, disillusionment, and joy - could be really helpful as we try to understand different situations with our partner. And, I can really see how being able to name and understand our feelings can help us navigate these stages. You've also started to connect our feelings to our actions or our behaviors. Can you say more about that?

TOM BURKE:

There's a lot of layers to these feelings, and I'm really glad that you went after this, Annmarie, because the feelings are deeply connected to our behaviors. And so what happens is we have a set of behaviors that we've learned over our life, we've learned how to behave in certain situations. And oftentimes the feeling will trigger a behavior, it's almost like a reflex. And that behavior might be counterproductive in our relationship, or it might be deeply misunderstood by our partner. I might raise my voice, so as I can catch the attention of a child, I'm not necessarily trying to use shame or any other thing to control the situation, but a louder voice might work in that situation. It could be so easily misunderstood. And if I come to learn how that behavior's misunderstood, then I can modify it. I have a choice. I don't have a choice on how I feel. I do have a choice as to what I do with that feeling.

And so this is part of the practice and part of the reason why sharing feelings is so important. And there's no doubt that most couples are going to find their behaviors that their partner has, that they see as not being helpful or perhaps worse, it's irritating, perhaps it's triggering. And so having the opportunity to be able to say what I feel when

you have that behavior is a way of giving the other person then the choice. I don't have to do that. I don't have to behave that way in that situation, but again, it requires practice.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I agree with Tom in that our feelings really do drive our behaviors and recognizing that is a key piece of understanding that our behaviors are a choice. Our feelings are a reaction. We can't choose to feel some way, but we always choose how we behave. And when we look at... I look at Steve and I, we have very different personalities and sometimes I will say or do something that may hurt him and I don't realize it. And if he doesn't have that ability to communicate back to me, "Ouch, that hurt when you said this, or you did this," then our relationship can never get past that.

So me understanding when he confronts me with saying, "Ouch, it hurt me when you said that, or you did that." Now I go, "Oh, I choose," like Tom just said, I can choose my behavior to either stop doing that or to understand that when I do that, it is going to hurt him, and now I choose that behavior. So I think recognizing that our behaviors are always a choice that we make. Our feelings aren't a choice, but our feelings often lead to how we behave, and that's a key piece for me.

TOM BURKE:

And I think there's something that people misunderstand a lot about feelings, and that's the morality issue. If I'm angry, then I see that as maybe not being a moral thing. And for me, it was very eye opening to understand that our feelings are not moral, so I can be angry and that's not an immoral thing. But what I do with that anger may lead to something that is not good, or it could lead to something that's very good. I could be very constructive with my behavior. And so I might be angry about a situation and by being able to share that anger in a safe way and saying, "This is how I feel," then we as a couple then can build a way of dealing with the situation. And again, children give us so many opportunities to experience feelings and to understand a lot of our feelings, or our behaviors, which are hardwired. There's a lot of them that we have to go back and reconstruct how we're going to behave in certain situations.

And I think if you look at it as an opportunity and you look at it as, "This is an area where I can grow," then one can really build on that. We often hear feelings are neither right or wrong, they just are, but boy are our behaviors are right or wrong. And they can be constructive or very destructive to our relationship and to the children we're trying to parent. And so learning how to unwire that is great and gives us a lot of opportunity. And something else I would just say to the people listening to this too, is that kids are incredibly resilient. So if you've been sitting there thinking, "Oh man, I've been doing this all wrong." You have the opportunity. Kids grow, kids heal. And so especially for really young children, you can pick up these techniques, you can start a new way of communicating with each other and your children and they can heal. And so don't give up, don't think, "Oh my gosh, it's all over."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'm hearing over and over again that this is a process, not an event. So I think that helps me think about, I haven't done something detrimental to my kids or my relationship even.

41:32 VOICEOVER

So, we pause the conversation here. There is more, and that's in Part 2.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think for me, there were so many key ideas I learned. This idea that feelings are spontaneous reactions to something outside, to another person, another situation, to an event, something outside ourselves is something I had not thought of. And – that they are not right or wrong – they just are. So, what I have to get good at – through practice – is being able to name my feelings and describe. And I need to work on communicating these with my partner and even my children. I also learned about this connection between feelings and my actions or behaviors. And that while feelings are not good or bad, I can work on making better choices about my behaviors – which is easier to do when I can name and describe my feelings. And this will all help my relationship with my parenting partner.

The addition of a child into a family is a time of hope and anticipation, but a secret to successfully managing that transition is to keep our relationship strong. Intentionally growing a healthy relationship with your parenting partner means making a daily decision to nurture and strengthen your relationship often by communicating in a way that deepens your intimacy.

Information on intentional communication can be found under the communication tab in the, I want to know more, section of ParentingMontana.org. In addition, check out the feelings chart, a way to teach feeling words, to help in emotional growth in that same section. You can also find an easy to use rack card on intentional communication in the website's media section.

If you found this podcast valuable, I would encourage you to listen to part 2, where we talk about listening.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I am a terrible listener, but I have forced myself to start to learn.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And we are going to continue to learn about ways to strengthen our relationship with our parenting partner.

TOM BURKE:

And I would also say that parenting is perhaps the most difficult job we're going to ever have, and we're not going to get it 100% right, but it is also an opportunity to grow more deeply in love with our spouse. And if we can do this as a team, if we can be on the

same page most of the time, if we can forgive each other, encourage each other, mentor each other, in the end I think the experience of raising those children is going to be incredibly invaluable to who we are as people and a couple.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So thank you for joining us today. Keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being added to ParentingMontana.org.

33:36 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities Division and is supported in part by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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Our theme music is Reasons to Hope from Reed Mathis.

Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

44:38 END