

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach, and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. There are people out there who will tell you that if you have cheated on your partner, you have done the worst possible thing that you could do to another person. But that is not my perspective! My perspective is that we're all doing the best we can, and human life gets complicated sometimes. I can help you approach your infidelity situation as a puzzle to be solved, rather than a big, bad problem that has to be fixed. When we approach our most confounding challenges with a spirit of curiosity, it's a lot easier to find solutions that are truly right for us.

If you would like my help sorting out your infidelity situation, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. The services page of my website is also where you can learn about the coaching packages I offer. I offer compassionate, confidential coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located. If you're listening to this episode when it airs, which will be in early-ish November, and you want to talk with me before the end of the year, or make sure you have a spot on my calendar in January, I encourage you to schedule your introductory coaching session SOON, as my calendar is filling up. I can't wait to meet you.

Today we are going to talk about some common beliefs about marriage, and why it's so important for us to examine and question our beliefs about marriage. There are a lot of messages about marriage – and divorce – out there in the cultural fog, so to speak. Put differently, there are a lot of ideas about marriage that a lot of people take for granted. Maybe some of the following beliefs sound familiar:

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

If you're married, it's better to stay married than get divorced

If I get divorced, I've failed – and failing is a problem

There's no guarantee that I'll be happier outside of my marriage within it, so therefore I should not leave my marriage

If I leave my marriage, I am going to devastate other people, or ruin other people's lives – or, at the very least, I will be unilaterally changing other people's lives and that is bad

It's better for kids to have married parents than divorced parents

Marriage is just hard sometimes

It's normal to be unhappy in your marriage

You have to just stick it out

I am willing to bet that you have encountered beliefs like these. I am also willing to bet that you might believe some of these beliefs are THE TRUTH!!! A lot of people do!

And even if you don't believe that any of these things HAVE to be true, you may worry that they MIGHT be true. When we hear a lot of people saying these things, and saying them often, we may consciously start to tell ourselves that everybody believes these things, so we may as well believe them too. Or we may half-consciously start to buy into these kinds of ideas. And let me tell you, this is important to be aware of.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

Our beliefs MATTER. What we believe determines how we will BEHAVE. The relationship between thinking and action is a close one, and an intimate one, but it's a relationship that we aren't often conscious of. But we want to become conscious of the relationship between our thoughts and our actions – and we want to make sure that we LIKE our beliefs, we like what we're thinking. I'm using the terms thoughts and beliefs interchangeably today.

More specifically, if you want to leave your marriage, if you want to take that action, you will have to believe it's okay to leave your marriage. And let me tell you, there are a lot of people out there who want to leave their marriages, or at least want to seriously consider leaving their marriages, but they don't really believe that it's okay for them to do so. They don't really believe that it's okay to leave a marriage. They know divorce is theoretically an option, but they don't really believe it's available to them. Maybe this is you! And if it is, you know very well that this kind of cognitive dissonance creates a lot of problems for us.

And that's because our thoughts are effectively our operating systems. When we believe something is true, we act as if it is so. When we believe something is possible, we take action accordingly. When we believe something is impossible, we act – or don't act - accordingly.

Ever heard the line from Henry Ford that goes, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, either way you're right"? The reason why this is the case is because we behave in accordance with our beliefs. And then our actions or inactions render something possible or impossible for us. Or actions show us that we either can effectively do something, or can't.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

When we know that our thoughts inform our behavior, and when we become conscious of how this happens in our own lives, we gain freedom and power. But when we don't know how important our operating beliefs are, and when we don't actively examine our belief systems, we tend to create results in our lives that we don't like. We tend to get ourselves into situations that we aren't thrilled with, and we tend to find ourselves "stuck" even when we really want to change. And that's not fun.

Also, when we don't know that our thoughts inform our behavior, it can be really difficult to take effective action to make change or solve a problem. So often we think that making change starts with taking action, and of course action is part of making change. But because our thoughts inform our actions, it's really hard to take effective actions if we're unaware of what we're thinking, or if our thoughts do not support the actions we want to take, or both.

So here's what happens a lot. I'll be working with a client who has been unhappy in their marriage for a long time, and there's been some sort of infidelity happening on their end. What I'm about to say can of course also impact people who are unhappy in their marriage but are not cheating in any way. Anyway, my married client will be unhappy in their marriage, and we'll start to talk about that, and pretty soon they'll start to say things like, "Well... I am unhappy, but I promised to stay with my spouse forever." Or maybe they'll say, "But isn't it just better to stick it out? Isn't it better to try and make it work?" The implication, of course, being that the right answer is that it really is better to stick it out and make it work, and I'm going to be the adult in the room who lays down the law on that one.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

Or other people will say, “I don’t even want to try to make my marriage better, but I know I can’t really get divorced because that’ll fuck my kids up.” Or, “Maybe I’m expecting too much. All of my friends who are married are unhappy too. Maybe this is just the way marriage works.”

And here’s what has usually been happening when someone has been telling themselves these kinds of things for any period of time: they have not been giving themselves a chance to actively and honestly consider what they want in relation to their marriage and their infidelity situation. And often, that also means that they’re carrying on their infidelity situation and all that goes with that, which some people find pretty stressful or tiring or otherwise undesirable, and they keep on keeping up appearances in their marriage, because they believe they have to. Which can also be tiring or stressful or otherwise undesirable. In other words, they perpetuate the situation they’re unhappy with because they believe they effectively CANNOT leave their marriage. They understand that they theoretically could, but they don’t believe that that option is really available to them.

The interesting thing about this is that when we are so freaked out about what it might mean to leave our marriage that we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to really examine whether we want to stay married or not, we rob ourselves of the possibility of discovering that we actually do want to stay married. The thing you fear will happen if you allow yourself to consider leaving your marriage may not end up happening! The opposite may end up happening! And I will tell you that sometimes it does. Sometimes I work with people who are the brink of asking their spouse for a divorce because they’ve fallen madly in love with someone else, and they come to me thinking that I’m going to help them leave their marriage, and what ends up happening is that upon careful consideration, they decide

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

that they not only want to stay married, or stay in the relationship with their primary partner, but they're actually very excited about doing so.

And this does not happen because I talked them into that! I don't ever try to talk anybody into any particular course of action, or any particular choice about their relationships. That's not my role. My role is to help people clarify their own thinking so that they can get out of their own way and make the choices that they like best.

What happens when we're stuck to the idea that we have to stay married or we can't get divorced or some variation on that theme is that we stay in a prison of our own making.

So if you're unhappy in your marriage, or considering leaving your marriage, or considering considering leaving your marriage, but you have not yet allowed yourself to seriously consider leaving, I want to suggest that your beliefs about marriage may be getting in your way.

So let's revisit the beliefs about marriage I mentioned earlier and take inventory.

I'll go back to my list of common beliefs about marriage, and I want you to ask yourself if you agree with them. Even if you agree with them only a little bit, that's worth being aware of. And there's no shame in believing any of these things, by the way. The goal, if we want to make changes in our lives, is to get clear on what we currently believe to be true. Our past and current beliefs have enabled us to take the actions that have put us where

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

we currently are. If we want to take different actions, we'll need to believe different things, but we need to KNOW what our operating beliefs are before we can change them.

So here's belief number one: if you're married, it's better to stay married than get divorced. Or if you're in a very committed relationship, it's better to stay in that relationship than leave the relationship. Do you agree with that? A little bit? A lot? Sometimes? Always? Never? Just notice the extent to which you agree with or accept these ideas.

Belief number two: if I don't stay married, or if I don't stay in my relationship, I've failed. Or, if I get divorced, I've failed. A lot of people believe this is true! I talk to plenty of people who equate divorce with failure. And of course, we also tend to think that failing is a problem. We tend to think that failing reflects very badly on us. So what do you think about this? Does divorce constitute failure? Is failure bad? And while you're at it, ask yourself this: is it ever okay for a marriage to end for a reason other than the death of one or more of its participants?

Belief number three: there's no guarantee that I'll be happier outside of my marriage within it, so therefore I should not leave my marriage. What do you think? Do you subscribe to this way of thinking?

Here's number four: if I leave my marriage, I am going to devastate other people, or ruin other people's lives – or, at the very least, I will be unilaterally changing other people's lives and that is bad. A lot of people are SURE this is true. What about you?

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

Belief number five: It's better for kids to have married parents than divorced parents. Check in with that. What do you think?

Belief number six is one of my favorites. Marriage is just hard sometimes. Do you believe that? And if you do, to any extent, what are the implications of that?

Closely related to number six is belief number seven: it's normal to be unhappy in your marriage. People love to say that! What about you, have you been saying that?

Belief number eight: you have to just stick it out. That's related to all of the previous ones, of course. And what's more, we believe that about all sorts of things in life. We tend to believe that it's fundamentally better to honor our commitments than it is to extricate ourselves from our commitments. I talk about this in episode 23 which is called "Deciding to End a Commitment" and I highly recommend you give that episode a listen if you haven't already. But for now, just ask yourself this: do you believe it's fundamentally better to honor a commitment, once you've made it?

The problem with beliefs like the ones I've just mentioned is that we usually either aren't even aware that we believe them, or we know we believe these things, but we also believe that they are non-negotiable truths.

Here's the deal, people: none of these things – none of the beliefs I just mentioned - are true in any absolute sense. They really aren't. And we'll talk more about that in a moment, but for now, let me say this. If you LIKE

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

any of the beliefs about marriage and divorce I've mentioned, you can keep them if you want to.

If you WANT to believe that getting divorced constitutes failing, and you want to believe that failing is bad, that is fine by me. You get to keep any belief that you want to keep. My only exhortation is that you make your decisions about what you want to believe as consciously as possible.

As such, my agenda is to encourage you to get clear on what you currently believe, help you identify what you are creating in your life from the operating system that is comprised by your current beliefs, and push you to ask yourself if you LIKE what you're getting out of operating from your current beliefs. I can do this to some extent through this podcast, but when we work together one-on-one, I help you do this very specifically and very thoroughly.

If you don't like what you're getting from your current beliefs, you have the opportunity to change your beliefs. You do not have to keep thinking the same things you've been thinking. You are allowed to change your mind, and you have the capacity to change your mind. But – at the risk of beating a dead horse with this point that I've made a few times already – before we can change our minds, we have to know what's on our minds. Before we can change our thinking, we have to become aware of what we're thinking, and we have to allow ourselves to consider that what we're thinking may not be as true as we think it is.

Some of our most familiar beliefs may be comforting in their familiarity. It's NICE to feel certain of things. But sometimes even the things we're most

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

certain of aren't as true as we think they are, or even if they are true, they may not be the ONLY thing that's true. And it may be more helpful to us to believe something else instead.

So, let's take one of the topics I mentioned above. A lot of people are SURE that if they're married and they have kids, they are going to doom their kids to a really bad fate if they get divorced. A lot of people take it as an article of FACT that even if their kids would be okay if they got divorced, their kids would still be better off with married parents.

When I ask people why they believe this, they sometimes say, "Well, studies have shown that divorce leads to bad outcomes for kids." But when I ask people about the details of the studies that have shown this, they often tell me, "Well, I don't really know, I just know that studies have shown this." And this is a great example of where we can get ourselves into a lot of trouble, even with the best intentions.

It can be really tempting to believe that we're doing the right thing if we're following guidance that comes from expert knowledge, such as, perhaps, a scientific study, or set of studies. Many of us want to "do the right thing," and we may look to experts for guidance on what the right thing is, and how to do it. And that can be fine, sometimes. But we always need to be a thoughtful consumer of the guidance we seek out.

As a former sociologist who used to teach families in society classes, and who used to wade through a lot of research on all things related to family life, I can tell you that a lot of the studies out there on kids' outcomes in relation to their parents' marital status are founded on normative

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

assumptions, and employ terrible study design. I would actually kind of love to go on a long and detailed rant about what's wrong with a lot of the research on families in general, and on divorce more specifically, but I'm not going to do that. Instead, I'll just say that although I am all in favor of making use of scientific research, we want to be informed consumers of the research we make use of. If you haven't carefully examined the studies that you believe indicate that your kids are doomed to bad outcomes if you divorce, you might want to do that. You might find that the research does not indicate that you – or your kids- are as doomed as you thought you were, or they were.

And this is not a knock against science in general, or social science in particular, by the way. Let's be absolutely clear about that.

And even if there were a million well-designed studies out there that demonstrated that divorce did lead to certain outcomes for kids that we might consider bad, that does not mean that you have to get divorced and live your life after a divorce in the way anyone else has done it. Just because other people have done things a certain way, and that has led to certain measurable outcomes, doesn't mean you have to do things the same way and create the same outcomes. If you get divorced, you get to determine how you do divorce. Some studies treat divorce as a single variable, but there are many variables within divorce. And for your purposes, it's important to recognize that there are many different ways of doing divorce, and you have the power to make the process of divorce what you want it to be, and make your post-divorce family life what you want it to be. Sure, some people turn divorce into an awful experience. But that doesn't mean you have to. And even if your partner does their best to make it awful, that doesn't mean you have to participate in the awfulness.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

It's also really important to bear in mind that we can't completely control how another person experiences life, no matter what we do or don't do. Sometimes people convince themselves that if they get divorced, their kids' lives are going to be awful, and if they stay married, their kids' lives will automatically be great, or at least better than they otherwise would have been. And that's an assumption you might want to actively question.

This is just an example of how we may go about questioning our taken-for-granted beliefs. There are so many other lines of questioning we might employ if we want to challenge the belief that kids are by definition better off if their parents do not get divorced. But the general point here is that we may want to scrutinize our most deeply held beliefs. We can see if they're as true as we've been thinking they are, and if we find that they don't seem as true as we thought they were, we can decide that we want to believe something else instead. And we can deliberately construct new beliefs that may be more helpful for us.

For example, we might want to consider entertaining the belief that we can do our utmost to create a great life for our kids, whether we are married or divorced or re-partnered or whatever. We can decide that our family life is not completely dependent upon our relationship with our spouse continuing to be a marriage relationship. We can decide that we want to believe that we can have a great co-parenting relationship with our ex-spouse, and we can work on cultivating that belief if we don't quite believe it yet. We might want to believe that it's okay for marriages to come to an end, and that families can keep on being families after a divorce, even if some things change within the family. We might want to believe that we can redefine what family means to us. We might want to believe that us doing what's right for us will always benefit our children in some way or another.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

Sometimes when I talk with clients about this, they say, “Well, I’d really like to believe all of those things, but I need evidence that that’s true.” And that can sound really nice. It can sound like we’re doing the responsible thing by wanting to see evidence of something before we consider believing it. But here’s the thing. Seeing evidence of something will not necessarily change our thinking. If we’re reluctant to change our thinking, we may maintain our reluctance, no matter what evidence we have in front of us.

Here's the deal, people. It's a lot easier to keep on believing what we have believed, even when we don't really like our beliefs, and even when we can see that our beliefs are keeping us stuck in situations we don't like. Sticking to our default beliefs takes a lot less effort than actively identifying and examining and questioning and changing our beliefs does. And in general, we tend to default to doing things that take less effort. We tend to think of action as something that requires effort, but thinking requires effort, too. And again, changing our thinking requires a lot more effort than sticking with the thinking we're familiar with.

The prospect of changing our thinking sometimes seems really threatening and scary. Allowing ourselves to consider that it might not be bad to get divorced may seem TERRIFYING if you are accustomed to believing that it is definitely better to stay married than to get divorced. It may seem like you are inviting an implosion of your Self as you know it and life as you know it if you allow yourself to consider that you might be able to have a loving, familial relationship with your spouse, even if the two of you don't stay married. It may seem IMPOSSIBLE to entertain the idea that it just might be okay to say, you know what, I don't want to be married to this person anymore, and that alone is a good-enough reason for me to pursue divorce.

Ep #114: Questioning Common Beliefs About Marriage

And you don't have to entertain that belief or any other belief if you don't want to. But if you want to consider leaving your marriage – or you want to actually leave your marriage – you may NEED to adjust your old ways of thinking about marriage. If your old beliefs have been preventing you from considering leaving your marriage in any meaningful way, it could be time to clear out some of your old ways of thinking.

And that may mean arguing with yourself for a little bit. In a structured way, of course. And I can help you do this in a way that's focused and productive. When we are willing to put the effort into examining our thinking and changing our thinking, we gain the opportunity to make changes in our lives that we are not able to make if we stick to our default beliefs and assumptions.

Being willing to relinquish our default assumptions, being willing to challenge conventional wisdom, being willing to think in ways that are different from what other people think may take courage. But the reward for our courage is often relief from unnecessary constraints, and the joy of living a life that we love.

All right everyone, that's it for today. If you would like my help identifying and examining your default beliefs about marriage, and commitment, and divorce, and of course infidelity, let's work together. You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I can't wait to meet you.

Thank you all so much for listening! Have a great week. Bye for now.