

Married With Benefits

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Season 1, Episode 7: Why Does It Take Such Nagging to Get Help Around the House?

Featured Host: Shaunti Feldhahn
Air Date: May 6, 2019

Brian: Welcome to the FamilyLife Podcast Network. This is Brian Goins. I'm your host of Married With Benefits. The podcast that is devoted to tackling some of the toughest issues in marriage so that we can help you better love the one you are with and experience the real benefits of saying, "I do."

This season we've been with Harvard-trained, researcher Shaunti Feldhahn. And we have been asking questions that we know every wife is thinking but she just isn't sure who to ask. Our question today comes from a listener who asks this: "Why doesn't my husband notice the things that need to be done around the house without me nagging him?" That listener happens to be my wife.

Shaunti: Honestly, this is a pretty common question. It's not just about why doesn't he notice what needs to be done around the house, but it's this bigger thing of how can I get my husband to do something without nagging him.

Brian: Yes. And I would vote for that. That would be a great thing, just to have marriages where—because nagging doesn't work, does it?

Shaunti: No.

Brian: There has never been any guy that has gone, "You know what? I finally changed because boy, she just kept nagging, and it was—"

Shaunti: It worked so well.

Brian: "I just wanted to change."

Shaunti: Oh, wow. Yes.

Brian: What is it about nagging that really irritates men?

Shaunti: As I've been doing this research with the guys, nagging is essentially one of the most explicit signals of *I don't trust you*. Right? It's *I've asked you to do something, and oh, by the way, I've asked you to do something again and again and again—*

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: --and it's essentially this *I am not trusting you to do it or to care about it enough that you will get to it when you can*. And frankly, actually, to be candid, here's the way I would answer her, at least a starting point, and then I want to hear what you want to say.

One of the things when I was asking men, when your wife does have something that she's asked you to do multiple times, can I ask why don't you do it? What is behind that?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And a lot of men said, "Look. I have signaled something by the delay. Maybe I'm working 60, 70, 80 hours a week and I'm exhausted. Or maybe I'm incredibly stressed because of something going on with the family or the kids or my boss, and I feel like having one more project put on my shoulders, I'm going to crack."

Some guys are like it's almost a form of—not that they would use these words—but it's self-care. *I just know that if I try to take on one more thing that I'm going to crack and I need to be able to come home from work and sit in front of the football game and not think for a while instead of tackling a big household project.*

So it's interesting, the way that, when I was asking the guys "What would you recommend?" that if this matters to your wife, it matters. Guys said, "Yeah, I know that it matters. I don't want her to be unhappy. It makes a huge difference if she will instead approach it like "So, when might you want to tackle this?" and more of a "Hey, can you do this tomorrow?"

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And "Oh, you didn't do it. Can you do it tomorrow?" Instead say, "This really matters to me. I really appreciate everything that you're doing at work. I know you have so much on your plate, but this is important. When might you tackle this?" And that is perceived, apparently, very differently.

Brian: Yes. And if you think about the idea of nagging, so what I hear you saying is—reflecting back—is nagging to a man signals *you don't trust me*. It's a code for —

Shaunti: Does it feel like that to you?

Brian: It does. It feels like, *Okay, here's another thing you're failing at*. Because, more than likely, the guy's coming home from work. Most of us guys feel like we never do enough anyway, right? We always feel this sense that—we've talked about that—

Shaunti: Even if you're working 80 hours a week.

Brian: Yes, and we've talked about that latent insecurity in every guy. So there's this sense of *I'm not accomplishing something*, so when I hear that voice, that tone, I know for Jenn, my wife, who is great at a lot of this, but she'll nag every now and then, and she'll typically do it when she says things like, "OK, I'll do it." She'll just stomp in front of me, and—

Shaunti: "Fine. I'll do it."

Brian: Yes. "Fine, I'll do it," and what I hear is *I'm looking at a failure. I'm seeing somebody who has failed yet again.*

Shaunti: And failed me.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And failed the family.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And we as women don't realize that that's how it comes across.

Brian: You don't think so? Like what—

Shaunti: No.

Brian: What is it behind, why—is the nagging just an irritation, like *I'm just so mad that you're not seeing this?*

Shaunti: You know what? It is. It is *I'm so mad that you don't seem to care about something that I really care about.* That's kind of what it is. That's what's behind it.

Brian: So *you're not caring about me.*

Shaunti: Yes. Okay, so this volleyball coach that wrote in this email. Why doesn't he notice that stuff needs to be done? We both work full-time jobs. Hello. And it is almost like *don't you care?* And now here's—if I can chime in about the mess and the dishes and all that kind of stuff—I actually have a little bit of sympathy, I'm telling all the women out there. I kind of have to turn in my girl card on this one, because I am --

Brian: (Laughing) I didn't know you had a girl card. I thought that was just a man thing. Like we have a man card; I've never heard of a girl card.

Shaunti: No, no. I have a girl card.

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: But on this one I have to turn it in, because I'm actually the reverse in our family. My husband is the one who is more the neat one, and I'm the messy one.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And literally, we had years where it caused huge marriage problems, because he'd be like *how can you walk past the dishes and not notice that they're piled a foot high?* Like, *how can you not notice it?* But it's like it's background noise to me. That wasn't something I learned growing up; it wasn't a skill I ever learned.

Brian: It wasn't a value.

Shaunti: Yes. Well, no—it is a value. I like having things neat. I just don't see it. Like the way I put it to Jeff, my husband, is "To me, it's background noise. It's like elevator music. I don't even hear the elevator music. It's just there."

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: And I don't notice that he's piled up a pile of laundry that needs to be done. And so here's the thing that really matters to me, and that from what I've heard from the guys, it actually matters a lot to men. If you will say explicitly to the one who doesn't see the stuff, "It really would make a huge difference if every night when you come home, whoever gets home first does the dishes so that we can make dinner. If you get home first, or if I get home first, can we please just have that be a thing?"

Then you'll get into a habit, right? In our household it was Jeff saying, "Can you please—it would make a huge difference if you see that the dishwasher has been run, if you would unload the dishes so that whoever wants to do the dirty dishes can do it?" And so that became just a rule in our household, and a thing, and it's awesome. I can handle that. What I can't handle is open-ended expectations, and I think that's where a lot of guys are.

Brian: And I think that's what you feel. It's as if I can't win, and nagging signals that. Nagging signals failure; signals the sense of *I'm not enough*. For a guy, it's *I don't even want to perform*.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: *I don't even want to—and I don't want to be manipulated to do something like that.* That's what it feels like is *I'm being manipulated right now*, and no guy that I know wants to be manipulated.

Shaunti: What was it you said at the beginning, like how often has that worked? I feel like Doctor Phil, like you can try, you can nag, but how's that working for you?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: So what is, for you—what would make a huge difference, if Jenn said—

Brian: I like what you said, like “Hey, could we talk about this? This is really important to me and it would make a huge difference if this happened”—whatever that might be—cleaning the dishes, doing the laundry, that division of labor that’s so important. I like the phrase that you said—

Shaunti: From some of the guys, yes.

Brian: From some of the guys, was, “Hey, when could you tackle this?” If it’s a project that has been on your To Do list, the honey list, maybe you’ve talked about it multiple times, whether it’s cleaning up the back yard or the beds, or whatever it might be. “When do you think you could tackle this?” Because as a guy, I want to tackle stuff.

Shaunti: (Laughing)

Brian: I like tackling things.

Shaunti: Tackle is a good word.

Brian: I like tackling people. I like tackling projects. I like tackling—because I want to accomplish something.

Shaunti: And it gives you a sense of *Hey, I’m all that. I actually accomplished something.*

Brian: Yes. And I want to make a difference.

Shaunti: So, here’s actually something that happened with us just as a quick example. I actually had been having an issue—it sounds horrible—but in my closet—we have an older house and in my clothes closet the shelves fell down. I think maybe I have too many clothes? But the shelf falls off the wall and fell down. I couldn’t—it was driving me nuts.

Every time I needed to go on a trip it was hard to like, *okay, which outfit am I going to bring?* It was in a mess. So I kept asking Jeff, I don’t know how to do that kind of thing, and he loves that kind of thing, so “Would you be willing to try to tackle this?”

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And he just—it wasn’t happening.

Brian: It wasn’t moving up his list.

Shaunti: It wasn’t moving up his To Do priority list. And so I asked as part of the research project with maybe a slightly ulterior motive, I asked a couple of guys, “So

what would your wife be able to say that would make a difference?" They gave me this idea of "When?" So I went to Jeff and I said, "So, this really matters to me and I appreciate everything that you've done." Because that's the other thing. Guys are feeling like *didn't you notice that I was doing this other big thing?*

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So "I appreciate everything else that you've done, but I really need this and it matters to me. When is reasonable?" And he said, "Okay. This week I'm traveling, but I will do it by next Friday." And I said, "And is it okay if you haven't had a chance to get to it—and I'm not blaming, but if you haven't, can I hire a handyman to come in and do it?"

He said, "Absolutely. I will do it by next Friday, or on Saturday you can hire a handyman."

I tried—it was very difficult—I tried to keep my mouth shut as the week went by and the days ticked off, and there was no movement whatsoever. So I'm like *I'm going to practice what I preach. It's really hard but I'm not going to say anything like "You haven't started it yet. You haven't started it."* I just kept my mouth shut. Literally at 11:50 on Friday night, he is on a ladder in my closet. I'm not kidding. Like actually, he started it at 10:00 at night, because he's like, *Okay. This is my choice.*

Brian: *I said it.*

Shaunti: *I said it, and this was my choice.*

Brian: I knew I liked Jeff, because he's a procrastinator like me. Let's wait until the last possible minute, but I'm going to do it. I know it's there.

Shaunti: I know it's there. I'm going to do it. He said—actually he told me later—it meant so much to him that I gave him that question, that request. He was able to give me a time, too, which was essentially almost two weeks away, and that I didn't bug him. He said that meant so much to him that I basically trusted that he would get to it, and if he didn't that was his choice.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And that here was a solution. We could hire a handyman if he didn't.

Brian: I think what you're doing is you're putting that power back into their hands, into the guy's hands. You're giving him the choice, the opportunity, and you laid it out really simply. "Okay, I've got this thing that needs to be done. Can you do it by Friday? If not, can we hire a handyman?"

Shaunti: Or not "Can you do it by Friday?" "When could you do it? You choose."

Brian: Yes. “You choose the time. You choose the means. You’ll get it done.”

Shaunti: So here’s the harder question, Brian. Okay, going back to this email from this listener, this volleyball coach—coaches the women’s volleyball team. She’s gone a lot during volleyball season. My daughter played volleyball, yours played volleyball. There are some long hours. You get home at 9:30, 10:00 at night often after games.

I know with my daughter, she comes home and she’s starting homework. With this volleyball coach, she comes home and she’s starting the dishes? Like that would not go over well.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So in more of the day-to-day stuff, not fixing the closet – “Hey honey, when can you do that?”-- but the dishes are going to be there the next day, and the next day, and the next day. How do you recommend as a guy approaching a husband who just doesn’t seem to care as much?

Brian: Well, I think this idea of *how do I help my husband value what I value*—you have to have a conversation about “It really means a lot to me when I come home and there’s at least a clean slate.” And to have a conversation about what are those little things. Maybe you can make a list, and maybe have a coffee conversation on a Saturday morning.

The problem is, we tend to have these conversations when we’re emotional, when you walk in the door, and you see the guy on the couch, and you see the dishes piled up in the sink.

Shaunti: “I cannot believe that you’ve been home for three hours and I’m just getting home at 10:00 at night—”

Brian: “--and you’re watching *Diehard* again.”

Shaunti: (Laughing)

Brian: “How many times have you watched that movie? I mean, the guy’s going to fall off the building and die. You know the end of this. Right? Bruce Willis is walking around on glass. That’s cool, but seriously, how many times do you need to watch it?”

“But it’s on TNT. I need to watch it. I mean, there’s just something about a magnet for my eyes and it helps me forget everything that’s behind me.” And there is that sense of – well you said when a guy is full with everything else in his life—

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: This is when it's hard, because when's a guy full and where am I just giving him a license to be lazy?

Shaunti: Yes. And every woman right now is leaning towards their mobile device and going *and*. . . ?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: *So, what do I do, Brian?*

Brian: Well, you're the expert here, but as a guy—

Shaunti: No, I'm going to let you be the guy on this one.

Brian: I'm the guy, the token guy here in this secret society of ladies. I would say that the first thing is to resist that urge to just react to the situation, and go, *Okay*, because that never works.

Shaunti: No, it's not going to.

Brian: So I have a pattern interrupt, and I just have to decide *Okay, when can I have this conversation?* I know for me, what really helps when Jenn needs to have that conversation of "I've noticed these habits that I want to change—that need to change." Okay?

Shaunti: Okay.

Brian: That whether it's the dishes or whether it's the laundry—

Shaunti: You mean you've noticed those habits or Jenn has noticed?

Brian: No, that Jenn has noticed. I haven't. I'm clearly not noticing, because I'm watching *Diehard*.

Shaunti: Okay.

Brian: No, she's noticing these habits, and she's valuing something. The best time for me to hear that is when we're not in the situation that I have anything to react against.

Shaunti: Okay. So step number one is just hold your tongue for a minute.

Brian: Yes, just hold your tongue for a minute. Then step number two is to not then just stomp off and start doing the dishes really loudly.

Shaunti: Okay. Yes.

Brian: Step number two would be, “Hey, maybe could you help me do the dishes or just get the job done?” But then to come back around on a time when it’s not in that moment. Saturday morning coffee, early in the morning.

Shaunti: Whatever it is, yes.

Brian: Sometime I’m going to sit down and go, “Hey listen. I came home three times this week and I noticed that each time there were still dishes in the dishwasher or piled up in the sink. I just want you to know from my standpoint, I would really love to walk in—it makes me feel valued when I can walk in and there’s nothing I have to do. Because you work, I work, and whoever gets home first—it would really mean a lot for that person to kind of gift to the other person—*hey, that’s not something you have to get done.*”

To talk about what it makes me feel like—because as a guy I do want to help my wife feel good.

Shaunti: And you want to make her happy.

Brian: I want to make her happy.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: Down deep, I really want to make my wife happy, and so for her to give me the opportunity by pointing out a habit, saying the facts, because I can’t deny those facts.

Shaunti: (Laughing) That you were watching *Diehard* when the dishes were piled up.

Brian: Right, I can’t deny the facts. Now, the wrong way to phrase it would be “When you get home you’re just lazy and you just sit on the couch and do nothing.”

Shaunti: Right, yes. Exactly.

Brian: Instead, put it back on “You know, it really makes me feel great when I come home after a long day and the dishes are done.”

Shaunti: And I can confirm by the way, statistically, from the men’s perspective and all the research, is that once you start going down the road of blaming and sort of labeling and *I cannot believe* and *why would you*, and *you don’t care*. First of all, all that’s not true.

Most men really care. Statistically, most men really do want to make their wife happy. Now they may also be full up and have worked 80 hours a week. So we do have to notice all that, but if you care about it, most of the time he wants to care about it.

Brian: Exactly.

Shaunti: It's more a matter of a pattern that's going to help him do it in a way that doesn't crack him and it doesn't crack you.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: So if step one is to sort of hold it at that moment and not react the way that you want to—

Brian: Let me just pipe in on that, because there's a great verse that talks about that in Proverbs, where in Proverbs 19 it talks about it's the glory of one to overlook an offense.

Shaunti: Oh, that's so good! Oh, that's so good.

Brian: And that happens every day, right? It happens every day within a relationship, with kids, in your marriage, you're going to see stuff that gets under your skin, that just irritates it, annoys you. It's like *if I can practice to be more like God towards my spouse, I might get the results I really want*. In that moment—

Shaunti: In that moment—

Brian: --in that moment, that doesn't mean you ignore it, it must means in that moment—

Shaunti: In that moment.

Brian: --I'm not going to respond. I'll overlook this and go *Okay, how do I fix this? How do I change and move forward?*

Shaunti: Right.

Brian: So that's step one.

Shaunti: Okay, so that is step one. And then step two is to not stomp off and go "Fine. I'm going to go do the dishes really loudly," because then you're going to be like *Oh shoot*.

Brian: Yes. Then it's shame, it's blame, it's—

Shaunti: All that.

Brian: It's all that.

Shaunti: And then step three really is pick a time when it's not emotional, and to say "I know you care about this, and it matters so much to me, especially during this crazy season," and all that kind of stuff, assuming that he's going to want to help.

Then I would add, if you don't mind, a step four--

Brian: Sure

Shaunti: --based on stuff I've heard from a lot of guys, which is if the first week that it doesn't work properly, like he remembers once and not the other times, don't throw up your hands and go *fine. He doesn't care.*

Brian: *He'll never change.*

Shaunti: *He'll never change.* Instead, go *no, we're building a new habit*, and then when he does do it, oh my goodness, the guys said it makes so much difference if—and I'm putting myself in the volleyball coach's shoes, but if she were to come home at 10:00 at night and see the dishes done once, and go "Thank you so much. That was such an awesome feeling walking in and seeing the kitchen clean! I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that."

A guy—how does that make a guy feel?

Brian: Oh man! Yes. It's like *I want to do that again if I'm going to get that response.*

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: As opposed to "Well, it's something you should have done anyway."

Shaunti: Exactly. Okay that's what I want to mention.

Brian: And when you don't say anything, that's what you feel as a guy.

Shaunti: Now here's what a lot of women listening to this are probably wrestling with right now. *Why should I have to just go all crazy over this mundane thing that's just his job? Why should I have to say thank you? Why should I have to "Oh-h-h you amazing person!!"?*

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: *I do it. He doesn't say, "Oh-h-h you amazing wife of mine!!"* So there are women who are really wrestling with what seems like this weird double standard or this expectation. Instead, what I would encourage any woman who's listening to this and who's thinking that, is to go *Yeah, okay maybe he should go all crazy over you when you do it, and maybe he doesn't as much as you want him to.*

However, the reality is that if you can build him up in this way, since this is actually kind of an emotional thing for a man—for you it's just technical, it's just get the dishes done—for a guy it deals with all this insecurity and all this question of *am I any good as a husband?* There are all these other emotional issues wrapped up in it.

If you can show him how much you appreciate him, not only is he going to want to do it again—so it's like this practical tool—but also you're building him up in this really important way. He's going to feel more caring as a husband and it will come back around to you in the ways that you need.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Maybe not “Oh, thank you so much for doing the dishes, honey,” from him to you, but maybe it will be other things. Maybe he'll be much more likely to reach across and take your hand when you're walking across the parking lot, or cuddle up next to you on the sofa when you're watching TV together and just be affectionate, because he feels built up.

Brian: I think what we're doing is we're talking about modeling a great principle, which is *how do I help my spouse value what I value?*

Philippians in chapter two talks about how “do not merely look out for your own interests, but also look out for the interests of others. Have this mind which was in Christ Jesus, Who didn't consider equality with God as something to be grasped,” but He comes down to our level. So He didn't expect us to change to be more like Him; He changed to be more like us.

So what we're doing, what we're talking about here is if I really want to see my husband change, I'm going to have to change.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: And the same thing is true with a husband.

Shaunti: The bottom line.

Brian: Yes, the bottom line is—if you model that in this area, then it's going to model something for your marriage to be able to go *Okay, how can I then have that conversation with my husband about this? Or how can my husband have this conversation with me about this?*

Shaunti: And ultimately that's what we're talking about here anyway, which is we're just talking to us as women—he's got his own podcast.

Brian: Exactly. We'll develop that later.

Shaunti: He has his own stuff that he needs to work on. This is about us working on what we need to work on, and ultimately God honors that.

Brian: Yes, absolutely. I'm really glad somebody sent in that question for us, because that's a great issue to tackle. As we think about those four steps—what were they again, Shaunti? Can you just—

Shaunti: Yes. The first step is to don't react in the moment.

Brian: Don't react in the moment.

Shaunti: The second step is don't stomp away and do it loudly yourself to shame him.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: The third step is some neutral time, some non-emotional time talk about how much this would matter to you.

Brian: Sure.

Shaunti: Here's sort of an expectation, something that would be a big deal. And then the fourth step is bear with him while he's learning, and show him the gratitude for the times that he does do it.

Brian: So what is one of the four steps you are doing well? Give yourself a pat on the back and keep it up. But I bet there are one or two other things that you thought that's what I need to work on. Maybe it's not overreacting in the moment but having the conversation. Some of you ladies that are out there you're not improving the situation. You might be quiet about it. You may not be nagging but you're just getting the job done yourself and that's enabling them.

Shaunti: And resenting.

Brian: And resenting it quietly. And that's not helping. So maybe for you it's I need to have the conversation and sit down and talk to him about what I value and how he can help value it. So, pick one of those things that you can work on this week.

Shaunti, as always it's good to be with you. Here at FamilyLife we are passionate about you experiencing oneness in the key relationships of your life. If you need more help and hope, we've got it at FamilyLife.com.

By the way, this podcast is listener supported. We have a tribe of folks who are partnering with us to help make it happen. If you would like to join us to make it more available for others you can go to familylife.com/podcast.

I'd love to give a special thanks to our audio producer, CJ3 and our project coordinator, Page Johnson for helping to pull this off. We couldn't do it without their help.

I look forward to the next session of Married With Benefits when we are going to ask the question, “Why does my husband seem to care more about work than me and the kids? This is a complex question. It’s not simple especially in dual income homes. We’re going to try and talk about that and how we can balance that seesaw of providing for the needs of my family both financial and emotional. I’m Brian Goins. Seeking to help you love the one you are with. See you next time.

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