

Married With Benefits

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Season 1, Episode 10: Can Me or My Spouse Have Friends of the Opposite Sex?

Featured Host: Shaunti Feldhahn
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Brian: From the FamilyLife Podcast Network this is Brian Goins host of Married With Benefits. We're committed to helping you love the one you're with and discover the real benefits of saying, "I do."

This season we have titled it questions every wife is asking. We've formed this secret society of women and one token guy daring to answer the questions that we know you're thinking, but just aren't sure who to ask. Today we're going to ask our featured host, Shaunti Feldhahn, a pretty sensitive question. "Can me and my spouse have friends of the opposite sex?"

Well, we're going to say, yes, but with a few caveats. #it's complicated.

Do you ever get this question?

Shaunti: Aaaaallllll the time.

Brian: Really?

Shaunti: Aaallllll the time. And boy, does it bring up some serious emotions!

Brian: Yes. I bet.

Shaunti: Oh, you hear everything under the sun on this one.

Brian: At FamilyLife® our goal really is to draw couples together in a world that is pulling them apart. When I think about this issue, it has probably never been easier to have an affair—even an emotional connection just because of social media, because of work relationships there's more women that are in the workforce and that are having those opportunities to be friends with other guys.

Shaunti: Yes. It's one of these cases where we've always had those issues potentially come up—it's just thrown at us today. It's really important to actually think about what *is* the answer to that question.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: I'll tell you—here's my opinion on this—just off the top. This is from, you know, having done all the research with men and women—there are *always* exceptions—to *all* of these cases, but in general, sure—you can be friends with the opposite sex with two *major* caveats—which is that it's actually pretty important for you to be friends as a couple; right? Wherever possible.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: That's like, for example, you and I started working together on this podcast and doing some of the stuff with *FamilyLife* because I'm here all the time, I'm recording—and you made really sure, really quickly to introduce me to Jenn.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And when you came to Atlanta, I'm like, "Great opportunity for him to get to be friends with Jeff." So, when you're friends as a couple and you know each other that way that—to me—institutes a—an automatic—there's an automatic boundary—there's an automatic, sort of healthy way that you as whoever this is—your colleague, this friend from church—then it can just be friends. It's like brother-sister.

Brian: Yes. I was asking Jenn that question like, "Okay, is Shaunti—are we friends? Can Shaunti and I be friends?" [Laughter]

Shaunti: And Jenn's like, "I don't know—I don't know about this woman! I don't know about her."

Brian: She's struggling with it. I think it is critical—like what you just said—bringing those couples together—early on.

Shaunti: There's another critical one though.

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: Now, there are probably many different caveats. These are the two that I think are the most important. The first is that this person knows and respects and enjoys your spouse; right? But the second is—if there is *any* season of difficulty in your marriage—no way, Jose. That is—

Brian: No way, Jose, what? No—no contact?

Shaunti: No way—that— Well, I don't know about no contact because sometimes you *have* to have contact, but *no* friendship.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Like, you cannot—in that kind of vulnerable season—put yourself in a position where you’re really good friends with somebody of the opposite sex and you’re having difficulty with your own marriage.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: That—to me—is a “Danger! Danger Will Robinson!” Like, don’t go there! It’s really interesting because I’ve actually seen some examples of where that has introduced a temptation and a problem that made the marriage—fixing the marriage issues—way worse—and it didn’t have to.

Brian: Yes. It seems like it’s a good thing; right? It presents itself as “here’s somebody to help me”

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: —and maybe they’ve been through it before, so why wouldn’t I talk to him. I mean, we’re friends!

Shaunti: Yes. It’s like yes, you’re friends, but this is one of those cases where right now you shouldn’t be. I can hear every wife out there getting her hackles raised—like, “What do you mean?”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: “Why shouldn’t I be able to have some means of support during a season where things are really tough?” The reality is—if it’s your *actual* brother—fine! Right? There’s not going to be any temptation there.

Brian: So, bloodline.

Shaunti: Yes. Bloodline. [Laughter]

Brian: Bloodline brother is—is cool.

Shaunti: Exactly! Cousin—that’s cool; right? I’m really let’s just be honest about it. The whole *When Harry Met Sally* movie? Can you really be friend?

Brian: Right. That’s a movie going back to what—that’s far—that—

Shaunti: It’s 1989 or something.

Brian: Right!

Shaunti: The actual—the ironic thing about that movie is that it is actually true. When you get to be super, super close with somebody else who’s the opposite sex, because you’re sharing a heart tie—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —there *is* a heart tie—in a way that needs to be reserved just for your spouse. If you need to break anything—break your friendship, not your marriage.

Brian: Wow. That’s a good statement. How do you know—what are some indicators that you go, “I might be straying into that area—where the friendship is making that heart connection.” When do you know—as a woman—that you’re thinking “This—I could be in that danger zone.”

Shaunti: Yes. Obviously, if you have any attraction to this person, that’s a little bit of a danger sign. That’s not necessarily like the end all—be all though, because...you have friends like—one of my *best* friends growing up was *probably* the most good-looking guy I’ve ever seen in my life.

Like, he *really* could have been a male model and it was really hilarious. We would all be with the singles group at church and women—we’d be at the beach, say, and women would literally stop him on the beach to ask to have their picture taken with him. However, it was interesting because we grew up together—he really was like my brother. Just because he was this super attractive guy, that wasn’t the issue but, you know, when you find yourself physically attracted—yes. That’s usually a big warning sign.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Can we just be honest here? We *know* when we’re getting our heart attached to somebody! You just—when you’re like, thinking about that person more than you think about your husband; right?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: When you’re wanting to ask, “What would *he* think about this situation?” when you should be thinking, “What would my husband think about that situation?” It is one of those things that—for us as women—and obviously it’s the same on the men’s side, but we’re talking to women here.

Brian: I was going to say—we’re talking to women but I wonder—is it? Do men and women even approach this differently?

Shaunti: I don’t know. You’re the guy—what do you think?

Brian: Well, it seems like, from even looking at some research, I think that it's harder to be friends with just women. We, as guys because—I think—we're visual—because—I think—we're made to be more initiators in this sense—

Shaunti: Interesting.

Brian: —and we have—let's just be honest—we have an inflated view of ourselves, so there's a desire that when—"Oh, there's a chase here that's possible. I'm starting to ind—she does kind of like me" and she might be sending signals that she *may* not be sending.

Shaunti: Interesting.

Brian: But I'm going to start taking it as, "Maybe she likes me."

Shaunti: Well this is where the whole "Me Too" movement—the origin of this is all these guys who were *convinced* that this woman really wanted them.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And they sort of talked themselves into thinking, "Oh no, this actress is really interested in me!"

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: She was just like, "No, please. Let me get out of this hotel room as quickly as I can."

Brian: Yes. Yes, and I think that stems from guys are feeling that—they always have a sense that they're more attractive than they are—typically.

Shaunti: Alright—so I have to ask you a question here.

Brian: Not me—but I hear a lot of guys do.

Shaunti: This is part of my research here—yes. Not you, of course, but however—you can—here—speak for men, in this way. This is me doing my research on air—how do you like this?

So, we all know that one of the things we've said in previous podcasts—which has been *really* clear statistically, from the research—is that men have a lot more self-doubt under the surface than we think.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: We *think* that they think they're "all that"—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Right? And yet, I hear all the time—what you just said—of guys think they're more attractive than they really are. So, where do those two—how do those two mesh?

Brian: I don't know what it is, I mean, Scripture talks about how not to have an inflated view of yourself; right?

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I think it's—for whatever reason—a guy can see a “signal”—and maybe it's speaking to that—desire to—

Shaunti: Insecurity?

Brian: —that insecurity to go, “Somebody does like—” “It seem like there's somebody that—” “My wife isn't liking me at home right now and yet I'm picking up on a signal that may not be there but I *want* it to be there”

Shaunti: Interesting. Ooohh.

Brian: “I want that person to be attracted to me.” And it kind of makes me go back to—especially guys that are in their 30s and 40s and they're realizing, “Okay my body—it doesn't look as good as it used to—but maybe *she* thinks it does.”

Shaunti: Interesting.

Brian: I think that's where some of it comes from is that it *is* speaking to that insecurity and it's making me feel like somebody else finds me attractive.

Shaunti: Well, we all know—listen—this question of “Is it okay to have friends of the opposite sex?” Really, the bottom line is—is it going to hurt or help your marriage?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Right? I mean, that's just the bottom line. Is it going to bring you closer to your husband or further away? If there is any sense in you that this guy is getting those signals—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —that's a really great point. This is that signal that you need to be sending to your husband.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Hey listen! There are plenty of women listening to this who are like, “Are you kidding me? You don’t know Henry.” There’s plenty of women who are like, “He’s so just my roommate.”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: We do have to recognize that, to some degree, it’s really up to us. It’s up to each partner to do their part, which means, on our perspective, it’s up to us to really try to build him up into that person that we *do* find attractive—that we *do* think is our knight in shining armor.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And that we are the most invested in rather than seeking that emotional filling somewhere else.

Brian: Yes. I think that’s the reason why the Bible says, “Guard your heart” I mean, He wouldn’t say it if there wasn’t temptation that my heart could get attached—

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: —quickly to jeopardize something that’s precious and it’s a great gift. Have you seen that happen? It seems like for a lot of men *or* women—whenever there’s an affair, there’s always a sense of, “I never saw this coming.” Right? Like, “I can’t believe this happened” or “I can’t believe I allowed myself to do that.” What they don’t—backtrack and go, “When was the first time that I allowed my heart to be open?”

Shaunti: Yes!

Brian: If we could have those signals of—it’s probably putting yourself into a plutonic situation that grew over time—it doesn’t just happen overnight.

Shaunti: No. Well, all the studies show that. Right? That’s one of those things that—there’s been a lot of research done on the reason behind affairs—there’s been all that kind of stuff—and they’ve all shown exactly what you said. It’s interesting—do you remember the Christian song, *It’s a Slow Fade*?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: That song is a perfect example of this and the video that goes along with the song. Now that’s a man; right? In that situation.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —but still; right?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: It's—it is the same thing—and *we women*—are *foolish* if we think that we're immune to that. It's just that it's more likely to be our *heart* that's getting attached—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —to somebody else, rather than starting with physically, visually finding somebody attractive. We're much more likely to think, “Oh that guys a really good husband—”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: “Look how well he loves his wife.” And then we're friends with him at work and we sort of, go out to lunch—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —with a group of people, and we sit next to him and think, “He's really funny.” Then, you know, maybe we do projects together and we *look* for ways that we can interact more and we're looking for ways to make sure that we get time together because it just makes work so much more enjoyable.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: At somewhere along the way, we have to be honest with ourselves about what's actually happening—and *that's* when the hard choice has to come because *if* you have gotten into *any* of those thoughts, you *absolutely* have to pull yourself out of it.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: I mean, even to the point where—I've talked actually to several people over the years in the research—where a wife recognized that she *was* getting attached to a colleague—and it was usually a colleague; right?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Or in one case I think it was a volunteer colleague at church, but still a colleague—and literally had to recognize and come to grips and hear from the Lord and hear from friends—it is important enough I actually have to quit my job.

Brian: Yes. Wow!

Shaunti: It's a small group. I can't avoid this person or I can't move to another department—all sorts of different reasons. It is so important I have to actually quit. The—when you start justifying like, “I can't do that—I need the paycheck.”

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: –or whatever, then you realize, you know what? There’s a problem here.

Brian: Yes—I can see a lot of women going, “Quit my job? Are you kidding me? I mean, that seems extreme!” And it seems like that’s how most of us approach these questions, is that we feel like we’ve got to create these *extreme* rules—so like the Mike Pence rule.

Shaunti: Right.

Brian: “I’m never going to be alone with a woman” and he got derided from—both sides, it seemed like.

Shaunti: –which drove me crazy because it was probably from a pretty darn good intention—but whatever.

Brian: Yes. It was a great intention. I heard—

Shaunti: But it was still a rule.

Brian: I heard recently—you know, our boys play *Fortnite*—of course—

Shaunti: –as mine does!

Brian: –if you’re a mother of anyone like, 10 and older—you know what *Fortnite* is and the *Fortnite* dances—and my son was doing some of the dances last night for you. There’s a guy—his name is “Ninja”—and he plays these games and people watch—I mean, kids don’t just *play* a game—they watch other people play a game.

Shaunti: –they watch somebody play. Yes.

Brian: He was criticized because he made the statement he doesn’t play with female gamers—because you can play anybody online and he makes a choice to not play with female gamers because, he said, “there’s an opening of flirtation that happens on the internet” that he doesn’t want to make himself available for. Women were going, “That’s not fair!” and “That’s wrong!”

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: What are the principles that you could put in place—maybe it’s not a hard and fast rule—but you go, “Okay, be wary of this” or “Do this to watch out—to make sure that I can guard my heart”?

Shaunti: I think—that’s it—it’s anything that is necessary for *you* to guard your heart. If you’re in a public eye in *any* way or people know that you’re a believer and it’s maybe in

a culture where things are fast and lose, in whatever way that you have to make a distinction for the *perception*—avoiding even the appearance of evil—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —then do that as well. It can literally mean—there have been many cases where, in my women’s leadership work—I work with corporations.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: I have male colleagues or groups in these situations where I’m having to have to take a cab with a male colleague to some event. In the purely corporate world it’s like, you know, you’re taking group of cab and sometimes it’s two or three women and sometimes with a guy and could be just a group of people on a sidewalk and you just go.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: There have been occasions where—because the culture of that organization was so loose—that I made a purposeful choice of, “Hey Shaunti! Step in the cab” where I literally said, “Oh, you know what? No, that’s okay. I’ll take the next one.”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Sort of making a point—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —of it. Not to say, “I’m sorry, I don’t get in a cab with men” but because I wanted to actually sort of show that there’s a distinction in how I handle something—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —in part because they *knew* that I was a follower of Jesus. I wasn’t being judgmental and I wasn’t saying anything out loud—

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: —it was just—

Brian: So you weren’t like, “No, I would *never* get in the car with another—”

Shaunti: No! I just—made a—sort of made a point of saying, “No, it’s okay. I’ll take the next one.”

Brian: Right. Yes, it's that idea in Romans where it talks about "be innocent," you know?

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: "be innocent of evil", you know? Be wary of the fact that / could be open to temptation. There's a divorce lawyer that wrote a book on—like, surefire ways to set yourself up for a divorce—like, how do you know you're going to be moving towards that. How can you divorce-proof your marriage is really what he was talking about—and he said *Facebook* is an affair generator.

Shaunti: Oh totally! Absolutely!

Brian: It has become this affair generator.

Shaunti: Connecting with old flames.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: In a moment of weakness you never know what you might end up doing.

Shaunti: Listen, this is a—it comes back to—let's just be honest we know when we are getting our heart attached to somebody else.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: That is where we are just—we are called to maturity.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: We are called to step into what God says is best for us—which *is* to help our marriage *thrive*.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Instead of doing *anything* that risks undermining it.

Brian: And when you think about that book, even in Romans, where Paul is talking about that, he's at the very end of the book and he's writing greetings to all these people that are in that church. And about—I don't know—half of those are women—so it's not like Paul didn't have women friends.

Shaunti: Yes—good point! Yes. Good point!

Brian: So it's not like you're saying—we don't want you to not have like—once you get married—Boom! —the front door is shut; right?

Shaunti: Well, no—that's what we were saying at the very beginning; right? It's that I actually think it's *fine* to have friends of the opposite sex as long as you have *pretty significant* boundaries.

Brian: You know, Shaunti, I had a friend of mine that sent me a list of diagnostic questions that you could ask to determine, “Okay, is my heart going too far?”

Shaunti: Ooohh! I like it!

Brian: Yes. It's by this guy, Dr. Linaman—founder of *Relational Advantage*. I don't even know who that is, but he had some really good questions. First, “Is your mate unaware of your opposite sex friendship?”

Shaunti: Ooohh! That's so good.

Brian: Yes. “Would you behave differently around your friend if your partner were present?” Like, are you a little more flirtatious when they're not there—and you're a different person—so that's a good question to ask yourself.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: Here's another one—“Do you have a physical and/or emotional attraction to your friend?” That's just an hon—you just got to be honest about that. “Do you ever compare your mate to your friend?” Do you think women do this?

Shaunti: Nnnoooo.

Brian: C'mon!

[Laughter]

Shaunti: Unfortunately, when you start letting your heart get attracted to somebody else—that does happen—a *lot*. And it's one of the things that most brings your marriage down; yes.

Brian: “Have you ever entertained romantic fantasies about your friend?” It's like when you start to think about *them*—and it doesn't have to be sexual; right?

Shaunti: That one is so obvious though! I mean, like, you've gone a lot further down the road.

Brian: Right. You really have. And this is a good one: “Do you and your friend ever exchange highly personal details about your lives or complain about your relationships to each other?” –and that was one that you hit on–big time.

Shaunti: When we did the *Facebook* live–with the panel of women–that’s a real interesting point where once you start, like, text messaging–everybody text messages; right? You’re texting a colleague–and if you start actually talking about stuff that’s personal–after hours? There’s an issue there.

Brian: Yes. Yes, absolutely. This last one–“Would you feel uncomfortable if your fiancé or spouse had the same quality of friendship with someone of the opposite sex?”

Shaunti: That–right there–is where the litmus test of your own heart *really* hits because it shows–if the answer is, “I’m uncomfortable with this” that means you *know* that you have to change even if you don’t *feel* like there’s any problem–but it’s out of preserving their feelings.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: There was a great quote by David Robinson.

Brian: Oh! San Antonio Spurs!

Shaunti: San Antonio Spurs! Amazing basketball player–follower of Jesus.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: He–I think they called him “Saint David”–

Brian: Right?

Shaunti: –because he was fairly well known for, you know, trying to be careful. I’m sorry! Professional basketball players have women *throwing* themselves at him. He was known for–with his colleagues–you know, they would flirt with these women, whatever–come up and hand them their numbers–and he would brush them off. Sometimes they were persistent and he would brush them off kind of rudely. Like, “step aside” “get away”–he would say these–instead of saying “no thank you”; right?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: “Get away” And somebody said to him, “How can y–you’re supposed to be a Christian, how can you justify treating people rudely?” He said, “If *anyone* is going to get their feelings hurt, it’s not going to be my wife.”

Brian: Huh. Wow.

Shaunti: We need to say the same thing about our husbands.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Ladies, if *anyone* is going to get his feelings hurt, it's not going to be my husband.

Brian: Yes. That's great. You were on a *Facebook* live recently and somebody made a comment about that about willing to—what was it about their friend's got to be a fan of their marriage—what was that?

Shaunti: Shannon Simmons! Man that woman is wise! Yes. She said, "If you want to be friends with my man, you have to a fan of my marriage."

Brian: That's a great distinction.

Shaunti: It's a great distinction. It works with opposite sex friendships and, frankly, it works with female friendships. Which—I got a question from another woman recently I think we should tackle on another podcast about, "How do you know when a friend is actually toxic to your marriage?"

Brian: Wow. Yes, that is good—we'll have to get that another time. So, as we close up—and you think about any other parameters that you'd go, "Okay, what are some principles that I could—that I could bring it down and say how do I make sure that I can have a friend but yet it not go that next step?"

Shaunti: So, I think, probably the to-do—the main sort of set of to-do's here—is to do whatever is necessary to guard your heart and to guard your marriage and to help it thrive, first and foremost. So, to be aware of your own feelings; right?

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: To be aware when you maybe justifying something. When you're starting to get that sense that your heart is attached to somebody else.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And to be willing to be obedient to the Lord in that case. Including if it's a situation where your husband is uncomfortable with it—and you think it should be fine—but if your husband is uncomfortable with it—his feelings matter most.

Brian: Yes. Absolutely. I think about that—that my wife always has access to my phone. Like there's not a text she can't read—

Shaunti: Yes. Yes.

Brian: –there’s not a *Facebook* she can’t look at—there’s not this sense of secrecy—that we are, as Genesis says, “to be unashamed.”

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: There’s nothing that we should be ashamed—and if the minute that I feel that—like a little twinge—then I know I’ve crossed that line.

Shaunti: Yes. It’s interesting—there are so many women today—especially younger women—who have been advised by their parents for years, “You know, you need to keep a little bit of yourself private.” So that if it all falls apart, you have a piece of yourself still left.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And it’s well intentioned advice—and it is absolutely one of the most damaging things that you can do—because marriage requires being all-in. Marriage requires what *feels like* risking everything and yet what we’ve found—in one of our big research projects actually—with what makes the happy marriages so happy is that those marriages were the ones that threw the caution to the wind—seemed-like throwing caution to the wind—taking the risk to *not* protect themselves—and yet finding that that action was what made their marriage so happy—because you drop all barriers.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: It’s amazing because both people really are longing—because that’s really what you’re longing for—

Brian: Right!

Shaunti: –everybody—man-woman—you are *longing* for intimate heart connection both a husband and a wife. It’s just—the problem comes when you start sort of thinking there’s issues here—and you’re *trying* to get that longing met in other ways. It may not be an opposite sex friendship—it may literally be that you’re watching *Netflix* too many hours a day because it makes you feel better.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Whatever it is—that’s the danger sign.

Brian: Yes. That’s good—because ultimately that’s what you want—you want to live happily ever after. And it’s going to cost something—and there’s times where it might cost a friendship, it might cost that desire to—to feel like my needs are going to be met from somebody else and thinking it’s a good thing because I’ve got some problems in my marriage. So I’ve got to protect that and come back to the marriage and go, “Okay,

how can we work through this and get to that place that—of transparency—of honesty—of openness.

Shaunti: And you can get there.

Brian: Yes. Great! So as we wrap up questions every wife is asking I'll be there is one thing that you heard today that you go I'm already doing that really well. Good. Keep it up. But I bet there are one or two other things that you thought I'm not doing that. Well, start there and see what impact it has on your marriage.

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.

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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.

Well, next time on Married With Benefits we are going to ask the question, "Does my husband secretly want me to look like a bikini model?" It's a question that I hope my wife is not thinking about me. I'm Brian Goins. Seeking to help you love the one you're with. See you next time.

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