

Married With Benefits

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Episode 12: Why Can't He Just Listen?

Featured Host: Shaunti Feldhahn
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Brian: Welcome to the FamilyLife Podcast Network. I'm Brian Goins host of Married With Benefits. We're passionate about discovering the benefits of saying, "I do."

This week we're here with Shaunti Feldhahn, a Harvard trained researcher, author, and marriage speaker. This is probably the number one question Shaunti gets after every conference that she does and that is how can I help my husband hear me? He always seems to go into Mr. Fix it mode. Well, I can fix that problem for you. Or really, Shaunti can. She's got some tips to help you feel heard every time.

Brian: Do you remember the video *The Nail*?

Shaunti: Yes. Absolutely.

Brian: The nail video? That is one of the funniest videos I think. How is you as a woman watching that? Did you relate to it? Were you like *Oh this is—come on. She's an idiot; she's got the nail on her head.* For those of you who haven't seen it, just look on YouTube; look up *The Nail*.

Shaunti: *It's Not About the Nail.*

Brian: *It's Not About the Nail.* You'll find it. It's hilarious. But how did you feel watching it as a woman?

Shaunti: So, here's the thing. Every woman thinks it's hilarious too, but we're also like *you're not getting it.* The title of that—*It's Not About the Nail*—is actually the case. This is what we tell the men. And ladies, if you are wondering if your husband just wants to fix it to get you to stop talking: No. Although that may be the case in some instances.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: But most of the time he's actually seeing this problem you have, this emotional problem, and he wants to remove the problem. He wants to remove what's causing you to feel so bad, so that's why he's jumping to fix it, as happened in the nail video.

Brian: Yes. If you came to me with a splinter, right?

Shaunti: (Laughing) Yes.

Brian: Let's get the tweezers and get this thing taken care of. So you've got an emotional—

Shaunti: And that would solve the problem in your mind.

Brian: That would solve the problem, and we would be done with the pain and we could get on to whatever it is that we need to get on to. But, like you've got an emotional splinter.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: That's what I'm hearing you talk about. So it's when you have emotional splinters—

Shaunti: And here is what guys don't get. So, ladies, this is what now you can share with your husband, because this is truly what men don't understand. When you say, "I don't want you to fix it; I just want you to listen," to your husband, he is—I guarantee you, because I've talked to thousands of men about this—he is thinking to himself *I have been listening for ten minutes*. Like *what do you mean "I just want you to listen?" I've already been listening*.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And here's what the difference is. They don't realize that for us as women what that means is "I want you to listen to my feelings." And here is the hard part for a guy: when Jeff and I do marriage conferences, we see the men all lean forward when I explain—here is what you need to do.

Guys, you have trained yourself (and you can tell your husband this) you have trained yourself your whole life that emotions and feelings and all those jangling feelings are kind of going to get in the way of solving the actual problem, what you think is the actual problem, which is the splinter.

You know, the boss embarrassed her in front of all her colleagues, and she's upset. She's talking about it that evening, so you're like, "Okay, let's set all these emotions aside because we've got to figure this out."

Brian: Yes, we've got to get the hit list out.

Shaunti: "What are you going to do tomorrow when you walk in the office?" So you get into this go-to mode. Instead guys, what you need to realize is that all those jangling

emotions that you're trying to filter out in order to get to the problem, those emotions are what she most wants you to listen to.

So if you can tell your husband, "I know this is going to sound really strange, but I want you to ignore the actual problem for a minute. I want you to set that aside. That's step two. Step one is truly focus in on all these feelings that I have."

Brian: Okay. Well as a guy, how do I do that? Really we're talking to women on how to train your guy to do this. Is that our goal here in this podcast?

Shaunti: Exactly. Yes, it is. Because every woman—or most women—have had this concern. This podcast isn't for men, but this is one where you can actually take this and help your guy understand this in the way that you're going to need.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So honestly, we tell the men, "Here's the thing. There's a step one and a step two here. And you don't need"—and please reassure your husband—"You don't need to take off your Mr. Fix it hat entirely." God has made men to be a Mr. Fix it.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: You don't want him to be your best girlfriend. But step two is when he gets to put on Mr. Fix it hat.

Brian: Okay. So step one is what most men are missing.

Shaunti: Step one is what men are missing.

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: Step one is don't focus on the fact that my boss embarrassed me and I have to figure out what I'm going to do tomorrow. Step one is focus on how I'm feeling about the fact that my boss embarrassed me, and pull all those feelings out. Ask what happened. "Did you feel like people were laughing at you? Did you feel like this was undermining your authority with your team? What went through your head?"

For the guy to ask those kind of questions is magic for a woman. So help your man understand that if you ask those kind of questions, you will now get a chance to talk about how you're feeling, you will feel heard. Then once you feel heard by all those jangling feelings, that is when you relax as a woman. That is when you feel listened to, and that is when the guy can move to step two.

Brian: So before we go on to step two—because I would imagine if I’m a wife sitting out there I’m going *Okay, so do I get to play this podcast to my husband?*—which may not be a bad idea.

Shaunti: Hey, it might not be a bad idea.

Brian: I felt that about your book *For Women Only*. I read *For Women Only* because my wife was reading it, and as a guy, I’m going *well, that shouldn’t be exclusive. I want to have the right to—I’m going to read that book*. It was the best book I’ve ever read for men to read, because—

Shaunti: Well, it’s validating.

Brian: It’s validating and you explain in there, this is how your guy is thinking. It was like *I’ve never been able to say that*. I’ve just not had the words or the stats or whatever it might be to back up and go *that is what I’m feeling*. So it could be that the best application for this podcast today is that you go “Hey, we’re going to tune in to this together. “

Shaunti: Play it for your husband.

Brian: Play it for my husband. I know it’s questions every wife is asking, but I would imagine most wives are going, Well, okay, do I just teach him how to ask questions now? Is that my role?

Shaunti: (Laughing)

Brian: Because that feels a little—

Shaunti: That feels a little weird.

Brian: A little weird, a little childish. And a guy hearing that is going *Oh gosh. But if Shaunti and Brian were to say it, then maybe it’s right*. What I hear you saying with step one is he’s got to ask different questions.

Shaunti: For a guy, his tendency is he just wants to make his wife feel better, right?

Brian: Yes. Of course we do. That’s our goal.

Shaunti: That’s the goal. And so he thinks he’s going to make her feel better by fixing the issue, the problem about the embarrassment.

Brian: Yes, let's take out the boss. Do we need to take out the boss? We'll take him out.

Shaunti: Take out the boss! Absolutely. And instead, no. This is where it helps him to know "You can make me feel better just honestly in step one by listening to all this emotion." Now, I'll be honest, okay? This is where the guys—when I tell them this—they get the glazed look in their eyes.

Brian: Mm hmm. Because that's what I'm feeling.

Shaunti: And I was just going to say, you've got that glazed look in your eyes right now while you're looking at me. You're like "Oh my gosh," because honestly, for men, they feel like this is like the embers of a burning fire, and you're going to pour gasoline on the flame. This is going to be this explosion of emotion, and I'm not going to be able to handle it.

Instead, no. That's not true. Usually what happens—we say it's not like gasoline on the flame of these emotions that's going to make it worse. Think of it—and if the guys are listening to this—actually it's more like drawing poison out of a wound.

Brian: Oooh.

Shaunti: As you're pulling out all those toxic negative feelings, she's getting a chance to talk about them—it's pulling them out of her, and you're going to see her relax more and more. You're going to see her feel heard. She's going to feel so much better, and frankly, guys, she's going to feel so much closer to you. So whether or not your guy is listening to this, help him understand that in step one, this is truly where she will feel loved.

Brian: Yes. I think the hard part for most guys, the only question they know to ask is "So how did that make you feel? So how did that make you feel?" And then it just gets—

Shaunti: Repetitive.

Brian: It gets repetitive.

Shaunti: Right.

Brian: But when you start going *how do I know*—let's say guys are listening to this—*how do I know if I've pulled that poison out?*

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: What I heard you saying was you'll start noticing it. You'll start—

Shaunti: She'll start relaxing a little bit.

Brian: Her shoulders might even drop. She'll start relaxing. She'll start feeling heard. So maybe there are some signals where you go, *Okay*. You'll know—

Shaunti: That's perfect. Yes.

Brian: You'll know that you're drawing that poison out. That's a great image. I want to do that.

Shaunti: And I was just going to say, ladies, while your guy is learning this, during step one when he's practicing this, is honestly to be able to say things like "I really appreciate you listening to me, this is helping."

Brian: So that's giving him clues. Yes. That's good.

Shaunti: We tell the men—and obviously this podcast isn't for men, but you're helping your man—we tell the men it really is going to feel weird the first couple of times you do this. This is what I hear from the guys anyway; they said it feels kind of weird.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: But man, once you try it and you learn it, it's like a new little skill set and it is so helpful. And so it will be a good incentive for them to keep going.

Brian: When I think about, we didn't come into marriage—either wife or husband—didn't come into marriage with this relational skill set or tool box.

Shaunti: Right.

Brian: Then it's like, okay now I know how to use this in my relationship, this hammer or this screwdriver, whatever it might be. So what you're saying, anytime you try something new, anytime you use a new tool, it's going to feel awkward, clumsy, but as a guy starts getting skill, confidence comes, and then he'll do it more and more and more.

So the great thing, the clue or the pro tip here, to help him know that he's gaining competence, is to go "Oh, gosh that feels good when you ask me that." Or—

Shaunti: "Thank you so much—

Brian: "Thank you so much"

Shaunti: --for helping me think through this,” or whatever.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Because step two is when he’s going to start doing the *Okay, can I put on my Mr. Fix it hat now?* You can even joke about it. He’s going to want—Ladies, I’m just telling you he’s going to want to feel like he’s accomplished something, and you can help him feel that in step one, like “You have accomplished something by helping me work through these feelings.”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: But he’s going to feel like that’s a little wimpy.

Brian: Right. That’s not enough! I’ve still got to take the boss out.

Shaunti: Yes. He’s going to feel like *but I want to accomplish something real*, you know. It just doesn’t feel quite as real. So my advice to women is let him. You’re a strong, competent woman. You can figure out what to do about the boss if you needed to.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: But it matters to him to be your—I don’t know what the right word is. Your hero.

Brian: Yes, your hero, your knight.

Shaunti: Your knight in shining armor.

Brian: Your superhero. Exactly.

Shaunti: And come in with the great advice. So that’s the next advice, is to actually don’t brush that off. A lot of women are so “Oh, man--working through those feelings. That was it. Thanks so much. I’m good now.” He’s going to feel like *Wait, no*.

Brian: Yes. Like *wait, we’re not done with the conversation*.

Shaunti: Yes, *we’re not done with the conversation*.

Brian: It’s so interesting. I’m seeing with both of these steps, the problem with most marriages is that the husband brushes off one step, and the wife brushes off the other.

Shaunti: That is so true. That is a great way of putting it.

Brian: So in order for this to really work and go forward, the husband has to embrace step one, which he typically doesn't because he wants to *let's get to step two. Let's start fixing the issue. Let's get it done. Let's pull this poison out. Let me suck that poison out, whatever it might be.*

But the wife is going, *it helps—you're actually fixing the problem when you just listen to my feelings, and I know that I'm being heard.*

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: But for the wife, if she misses step two and the husband doesn't feel –

Shaunti: Then he's going to feel—Yes. Exactly.

Brian: *I don't feel like I'm adding anything to the equation.* That's the problem for a husband. He doesn't feel like he's adding any value when he's just asking questions.

Shaunti: Even though he is, but he doesn't feel like it.

Brian: He doesn't feel like it. He feels like it when he's actually trying to accomplish—generally, most men are feeling that.

Shaunti: And I would actually say, honestly, ladies, there is a bit of a step three as well. This is where—I'm going to say this very carefully—ladies, don't try to put your husband in the position of being your best girlfriend. Don't expect him to listen to your emotions for hours. This is one of these topics that's probably a whole other podcast. For guys, talking about emotions and feelings is really exhausting for a guy.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Actually, there's a brain wiring reason behind this, because there are certain connections to certain emotional centers in the brain that are stronger in the woman's brain than in the man's brain, and men's connections are stronger for the action centers. I know it's a big surprise to everybody.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: But what it means in practice is that he can do some of that pulling out the feelings, but I've had so many women who feel like *he doesn't care about me because he won't sit and listen to me for hours the way that I do with my best girlfriends over coffee*, and they think he's inadequate as a husband and he doesn't care.

Ladies, you're trying to treat him like a girl. Guys aren't like that; their brains literally get sort of full up in the amount of emotion they can process at one time. So for me, step three is recognize when you're going through these things and he's getting that glazed look in his eyes, and honestly don't let yourself think he doesn't care.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Just recognize he's a guy.

Brian: He's just full.

Shaunti: And this is when, if you need to process this some more, call your best girlfriend, and talk about what happened at work, and listen to her gasps of horror as you tell the story if you need that from someone in addition to your husband. Honestly, don't put that on him. Don't put all of that on him, I should say.

Brian: Right. And it doesn't give the guy a pass if he goes *Oh, I'm full* after three minutes.

Shaunti: No, no, no. Let's be reasonable about this.

Brian: Let's be reasonable about this.

Shaunti: What seems reasonable to you, Brian? If you and Jenn are having this kind of conversation, how long can you listen to this emotionally deep discussion and pulling out those feelings before you start feeling like you're missing things?

Brian: I'm probably not like most guys. I used to be a pastor.

Shaunti: Yes, that's true. You've trained your brain.

Brian: Yes, I've trained my brain and I do have a high tolerance for *Hey, let's talk about*—maybe too much. My wife tends to be more of the *let's just fix it*.

Shaunti: Oh, that's funny.

Brian: Yes. It's a little mixed up, I know. All the wives are going *Oh, great! I'd like to be married to that*. Well, not always, because then not as much gets done. So be happy with the guy that you're married to.

I think that's a great question, is how long? For most guys, let's go 15 minutes. Let's go half of a sitcom. Okay?

Shaunti: (Laughing) That's a great way of putting it.

Brian: And anything more than that would be bonus.

Shaunti: If he can.

Brian: If he can, but look for those clues. Look for that glazed eye. Look for that—and maybe even say, “Hey, could we talk about this again tomorrow?” or give an option. Give a way to go, “Thanks so much for listening. I really appreciate the time. Maybe we could talk about this more later.” And then see. He might have an open “No, no. What else do you need to talk about?”

Or it gives him an out to be able to go, “I need to get to the garage and fix this deal. I have to get the bike put back together for our kids”—whatever it might be.

Shaunti: Or, “I need to let my brain go sit and talk about nothing.”

Brian: He won't say it like that. He'll say it like “Let's go get some work done. It's a bit like—for a guy to get into that feeling area and just to talk about feelings—it's a bit like—have you ever tried to work up in the attic?”

Shaunti: Mm hmm.

Brian: You *can* do it.

Shaunti: Oh, but it's hard. It's cramped.

Brian: But I'm cramped, I'm not comfortable.

Shaunti: It's a good analogy.

Brian: I get hot, you know?

Shaunti: Yes, right.

Brian: I just can't stay there for long, but I'm willing to go there if we need to get something done.

Shaunti: That's a great analogy. Some of the guys described it as like trying to write with their left hand if they're right-handed.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Like, I can do it, but it's uncomfortable and I have to practice it, talking about feelings.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So ladies, what you need to hear is that guys want to be what you need. They just don't realize that really you have this step one of needing them to help pull out your feelings and talk about how you felt, and how embarrassed you were, and who was saying what behind your back and how you felt about that.

There is the step two that you might miss, which is let him be Mr. Fix it and go into all the things and get his good advice and his perspective, because that's something that really matters to him.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: And then step three, if you still need to talk about it, if he's got the glazed look in his eye and he really can't—he's up in the attic trying to work and banging his head on the eaves—that's what it feels like talking about feelings, then say "That's okay," and don't put that on him like *you don't care about me*.

Instead say this is maybe the point where I need to call my best girlfriend. This is the point where I need to call my mom. This is the point where I need to tell her about what happened and get that input.

Brian: Yes. Right.

Shaunti: And realize this is going to make both of you happier.

Brian: Absolutely. And maybe just a pro tip is just to ask the question *is this the right time to have this conversation?* If he's in the middle of a game he's really been wanting to watch—

Shaunti: Oh, yes. Okay. That should be like the basic starting point, right?

Brian: Yes. I don't want to assume anything, but sometimes your best conversation will be had if you just start with the question, "Hey, honey, I need to talk to you about something that happened at work today—or with the kids—or at church—whatever it might be. Can we talk about that right now? I just need 15 minutes—or 30 minutes."

Shaunti: And let him pull himself out of whatever he's doing.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Because obviously, if it's important to you emotionally, if there's something really going on, it doesn't matter that the game is on. He needs to turn his attention—

Brian: Exactly.

Shaunti: --but give him a minute.

Brian: Give him a chance—

Shaunti: Give him a chance to do that.

Brian: --to shift. As opposed to just sitting down and saying, "Gosh, I have to tell you about this thing."

Shaunti: Like *what? Huh?*

Brian: All of a sudden I'm—oh wait. My mind doesn't move that quickly. I'm over here.

So those are good. I really like this concept of a lot of marriages are just missing it because one spouse is focused on one of those steps, and they don't give the other spouse the chance to really engage in that step.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: Whether that's step one, focusing on the feelings for the husband, or step two for the wives like *I don't need to fix it now, because my feelings are all taken care of*. Or step three, let's not expect our husband to be our best girlfriend.

That's not his role; that's not who he is, but he does want to step in and help you with your feelings, and with your problems. Believe that about your husband. He really does. I do. I just may not know exactly how to do it.

This has been really helpful. What a great question! Pass this on to your friends, to those of you who know there are other marriages that are dealing with this. We'd encourage you: forward this podcast on. If you have other questions, go to our Facebook account for FamilyLife and just ask a question to Shaunti or to myself, to Brian. You never know; it might come onto the next podcast.

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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 a question that my wife sent in, "Why does my husband seem to ignore me and the kids when he comes home from work?" It takes him a while to connect with me. We are going to get a glimpse behind the curtain as to what's going on in his man brain. Find out it's nothing personal. I'm Brian Goins, seeking to help you love the one you are with. See you next time.

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