

Married With Benefits

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Episode 13: Why Does My Husband Ignore Me and the Kids When He Comes Home From Work?

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 helping you draw close in a culture that seems to be pulling you apart.

I'm with Shaunti Feldhahn and we're answering questions that every wife is asking. One that comes up a lot is, "Why does my husband ignore me and the kids when he comes home from work?" It seems like it takes him a lot longer to want to connect with me.

Shaunti, it was great to see you on the plane coming out here.

Shaunti: I know. That was hilarious. I'm like—"Wait! What?"

Brian: That was weird.

Shaunti: "I'm flying to meet you."

Brian: You were kind of criticizing me, like, why wasn't I helping you with your bags.

Shaunti: Actually, you didn't realize, because I was actually teasing you, because I saw you before you saw me.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: I was struggling with this heavy suitcase. I was trying to put in the overhead bin.

Brian: I was not being very chivalrous in that moment.

Shaunti: The flight attendant said, "Oh my gosh! Maybe, we can get a guy." So, you had seen me, like—"Maybe, this guy over here who is like not helping." You were like—"Wait. Oh, I'm sorry. Oh."

Brian: Yes, I felt terrible—like as you two are both manhandling this thing up into the bin. What did you put in there?

Shaunti: Rocks.

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: I don't know. I had books or something in there. Anyway, I probably should apologize because I was trying to tease you because you hadn't seen me yet.

Brian: It was funny.

Shaunti: Poor thing—you were, like, feeling terrible, and I didn't mean it.

Brian: And we had something I've never had happen. I mean you fly a lot.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I've never had this happen. We sat on the tarmac for—

Shaunti: We did.

Brian: This is—

Shaunti: An hour.

Brian: This is so prima donna when people share their travel stories of how hard it is to travel.

Shaunti: But we have to.

Brian: Yes. We were held up on the tarmac because they didn't have the cards.

Shaunti: The seat-back emergency cards.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: The plane had come to the gate from the hangar without the seat-back emergency instruction cards which they can't legally / by law take off without.

Brian: Right.

I'm going, "Who took them? Was that a practical joke? Was it, like, an upset attendant that said, 'I'm going to show them! They're not going to'"—

Shaunti: No. Every—literally, every card was missing.

Brian: Gone.

Shaunti: So, they had to—if I'm remembering correctly—they finally had to raid a plane—

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: —that parked four gates down and take all their cards off and put them on ours so we could finally take off an hour late.

Brian: It sounds like we're—yes, they were perpetuating a cycle. That's probably—we were probably—that's probably what happened to ours.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: Somebody raided ours—

Shaunti: Somebody did the same thing.

Brian: —and it just keeps passing on. Well, that's not what we're here to talk about, but I just thought that was really funny.

Shaunti: That was a new one.

Brian: We sat there forever, and I couldn't wait to get home; but we are here recording in Little Rock, and it's great to be with Shaunti. It's interesting. You get a lot of these questions whether you're at conferences speaking or online—

Shaunti: Yes, I do.

Brian: —where people just throw random questions. How often do you get this one that we're talking about today—just where—“My husband comes home”—

Shaunti: A lot.

Brian: —“and he is not engaging. He just wants to”—we kind of touched on this a little bit in another episode where we talked about video games.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: So, if you need more information about that, it's like—“Why does my husband seem to be so passionate about video games?”

Shaunti: “He's a grown man!”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: “What’s up with the video game?”

Brian: “Why would he do that?” But we touched on this topic of—“He’s coming home, and he just seems to want to escape. So, what is it when he comes home and he’s not”—the first thing I think every wife would want is: “He should want to engage with me. I’m the love of his life.”

Shaunti: Yes. Oh, and—“He should be eager.”

Brian: Right—“and excited.”

Shaunti: “I want to share what’s going on my day, and I want to tell you about this thing that happened,” and “What happened with that meeting, honey,” and “I want him to have that same level of engagement. Instead, I get a grunt and ‘Can I get a bottle of water? I’m really thirsty.’”

Brian: Right—or something other than water.

Shaunti: Or maybe, something other than water and disappearing to sit in front of the television and watch football or whatever. That’s stereotypical, but there is a reason for the stereotype—is that, that happens.

Brian: Yes, I think if Jenn were sitting right here, she would go—“Yes, Shaunti, please talk about my husband now.”

“Why does he do this?” Because it does seem—there is this energy that—this energy loss. It’s almost like powering down, if you’ve ever watched *Star Trek*. You just power down. When a husband walks in and she’s asking—Jenn’s asking questions—I’m just like—“Why do I do this? Why don’t I just jump in and go—‘Hey, let’s talk!’”

Shaunti: “Let’s talk!”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: It’s interesting. I don’t know all the scientific terms for this, but you know there is this common idea that men run out of words; right? Women just keep talking, and we have a certain number of words a day. Men have this—like we have 20,000, and they have 8,000—or whatever it is.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: The reality, though, is that there is something to that. The neuroscientists have actually quantified some of this. The thing that hacks us is that, for us, we are just

entering the next stage of engagement for the day. You know, we've come home from work; you've come home from work; or we've been with the kids all day, and you've been this all day. Then, the next thing happens is—"Oh, goody, my husband's home"—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —"my best friend. I get to, now, share all the other stuff that's happened." The reality is that, for a man / for him, communication and sharing and words and verbal processing—which is what he has had to do all day—actually takes different parts of his brain. It takes more work for a guy than a woman because women are naturally verbal-processors. That's the way our brains are wired. So, when he is done verbally processing / when he's able to walk out the door, he is automatically like—"Oh, thank God."

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —like—"I actually don't have to do that anymore."

Brian: "So, I'm done verbal processing for the day."

Shaunti: For the day—and he's out of words. This is all in his mind. This is what it feels like. For us, as women, because we are entering the next stage, we—now, we are like—"Oh, good, I get to process."

The analogy that I use with women is to understand that actually it's not that he is done. It's just that he feels done right now. If you can give him a certain amount of space—and every guy is going to be different. It might be half an hour here, or it might be an hour and a half for a different guy. Whatever it is, give him that ability to sort of let his brain just sit.

Brian: To reset.

Shaunti: To reset. The analogy—actually, the word picture is: Picture a pitcher of water—

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: —and it started out the day empty. I'm not comparing the male brain to an empty—

Brian: I don't know if I like where this analogy is going.

Shaunti: Okay, just work with me here for a minute.

Brian: Uh-huh.

Shaunti: In terms of the words—let's just say words.

Brian: Okay.

Shaunti: Picture an empty pitcher; and during the day, all day at work—whatever—he's a student—whatever it is that he is doing—all this stuff has been pouring into his pitcher. At some point during the day, his pitcher was full.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And he still had to stay to the end of the day; but that last couple of hours—I don't know—like he's done.

Brian: He's not there.

Shaunti: I've heard a lot of men say that they never try to schedule meetings after about two or three o'clock because they want to be able to do stuff that doesn't involve too much interaction.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So, that's—I don't know if that's most men, but that's certainly something I've heard a lot.

Brian: I just don't like to schedule meetings.

Shaunti: Period?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Good to know. So, at some point, that water has been poured in; and it's still pouring; right? He's had those meetings. He's had other stuff pouring in. It hasn't been absorbed. It hasn't gone into the pitcher. It's just sort of pouring off.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: That's the word picture.

Brian: So, it's spilling over.

Shaunti: It's spilling over. It's not—some of that is being absorbed, and some of it isn't. Now, if he comes home and the wife pours, it's now really spilling over.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Now, he's recognizing, "This person that I love—I'm not hearing what she's saying. She's going to be upset," or "I want to—what happened with the kids?"—like—"I want to absorb it, but I can't"—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —"like physically can't."

Now, imagine that that pitcher—actually, the pitcher—it actually isn't flat. It isn't solid on the bottom. Imagine that it actually has a sieve on the bottom, and it's like a coffee filter or something that the water can seep through; but it's seeps through slowly. It's got to go through at its own pace. So, you let it sit. He comes home. You don't pour more water in. You just let it sit.

At some point, the water will seep through. He will, now, have had a chance to—the water level has gone down. Now, you can pour more words in. You can have more conversation, and he feels like he can absorb it. He can think about it. It's not that sense of having to fight that verbal processing.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: I know it's a clumsy word picture; but that's the way, when I listen to guys describe it, that's just what it feels like to me.

Brian: So, I would think that some wives are sitting there going—"Great, you're just giving me license to have my husband feel like an emotional rock. He can just go play video games or watch ESPN. Is that what you are telling me to do? He's just going to go and vacate from—I mean I've been—had a busy day too,"—

Shaunti: Exactly.

Brian: —"and I've got—now, I'm working on the meal and kids. They're running rampant."

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: "Are you just saying, 'Hey, he goes off and just ignores all of his responsibilities so that he can recharge or so the water can drip through?'"

Shaunti: Listen, you—and you have to tell me how to approach a guy like this; but from what I can tell, the men don't mind—it depends on who has done what all day. Like, Jeff—one of the things he's said is—at times—is: "I don't mind if there's a chore that has to be done."

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: Like, “Go mow the lawn”; you know? “I’ll go mow the lawn”—right?—or “I’ll do the dishes as long as I don’t have to talk”—

Brian: That’s good.

Shaunti: —“for a little while. If you’ve been running around at work all day and I’ve been running, I don’t get a free pass; just like you don’t; but just let me do something to put my brain on hold”—for whatever that is. [Laughter]

Brian: I like that. So, what I hear you saying is: You’re not giving license for the guy just to escape; but what you are giving women permission towards is this idea of just don’t engage if he’s not ready to engage.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: He may be. He may have a day—or he may have a job where he’s—

Shaunti: And there are different guys; you know?

Brian: Or he might be—you know, he might be working with his hands all day, he hasn’t really been talking at all, and he is open to engaging. Who knows? But if your husband is the type of guy where—and you know—you know your husband—he’s coming home, and the last thing he wants to do is have a deep, personal conversation. Help get dinner ready, but don’t talk about something that’s really deep.

Shaunti: Well, and it’s—here’s the thing also. You’re going to have to tell me, Brian—you’re the dude / you’re the husband—

Brian: Yes. I’m the token guy.

Shaunti: You’re the token guy. You’re going to have to help me and the women listening to this understand what it feels like as a husband who cares about his wife—like he cares that she’s had a hard day—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: You do. If Jenn has had a hard day, you want—I’m assuming here—you want to listen.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Help the women listening to this understand what it feels like to be hit with this and wants to, but not feeling capable of it. What does that all feel like for you?

Brian: I think quicksand.

Shaunti: Oh, interesting.

Brian: I feel like I've been in—especially at the end of a day. You just feel like you're logging through quicksand. Then, when you come home—

Shaunti: By the end of the day, it's quicksand—okay; yes.

Brian: By the end of the day, it feels like it's this quicksand. For a lot—guys tend to be fixers; and I know for me, if I feel like I haven't accomplished something—like if it feels like—“Man, we didn't really nail anything down today,” or if we didn't advance the ball—

Shaunti: Oh, like, it's been one of those days that just like—“UGH!”

Brian: It's been one of those days. So, you're just feeling like—“I'm leaving, and I'm not—or haven't really won today.” Then, you come home, and you're still in that mentality and that mode; and depending on what the conversation is even if it's a positive one or if it's about something else that's not quite done or if you want to explain the day—I don't want to explain about quicksand.

Shaunti: Oh, and she's like—“So, what was your day like?”

Brian: Yes—“What was your day like?”

Shaunti: “What happened?”

Brian: It's like—“Oh, it was fine.” I mean that's what every guy says, and I'm sure every wife hates hearing that.

Shaunti: Oh, totally. We absolutely hate hearing that.

Brian: Can't stand it. Like that word—

Shaunti: It's like—“Let me into your life, please!”

Brian: Right. I'm going—“I don't want to talk about my quicksand.”

Shaunti: So, what does a wife do when—like, for example, for you—if I'm putting myself in Jenn's shoes—she's like—“But I want to hear about the quicksand. That was a hard day for you.” Is there a middle ground where you can share? What does that look like?

Brian: So, I think—something lately that Jenn has been doing that's been really good for me is—I'll either call and kind of get a preemptive—"Hey, this is my emotional state right now."

Shaunti: Are you serious?

Brian: I do. I've been—

Shaunti: Oh, that's fascinating.

Brian: —trying to work on that. I'm just calling and going, "It's been one of those days"—or whatever—"I just need—I need to escape or something like that when I'm coming in the door." Then she knows—that's kind of a code word.

But even if you don't have that, I know one thing that Jenn has been doing is she may not engage with me around my day; but we get dinner on the table. We start talking / talk to the kids; and then after dishes are all cleaned up and stuff, she's like—"Could we sit down for a minute?"

So, it's been that hour or so of just easing back in. That water has gone through the sieve.

Shaunti: Interesting.

Brian: The quicksand has kind of started coming off a little bit, and it's like—"Okay." Maybe, some questions you could ask, like: "Where did you feel like you won today?" "What were your highs / lows?" "What was your high? What was your low?" As opposed to an open-ended question of—"How was your day?"

Shaunti: "How was your day?"—yes. Well, the thing that I'm wondering. As a guy, I'm curious, if you—do you ever find it painful to recount things where you didn't win? I mean not—excuse me—not that—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —gives you a free pass because a wife wants to hear that. She wants to hear the painful stuff.

Brian: Right. I think it's the open-ended nature of it. It's like there are just too many targets. It's like, for a guy—I know for me it's like—"Give me one target I can talk about."

Shaunti: So—"Tell me something that happened today."

Brian: Yes—"Tell me something"—or "Tell me something that frustrated you today," or "If you could change anything about your day today, what would it have been?"

Shaunti: Does it help, as a guy, to talk things through a little bit. Because, for a woman, if my husband were to say, “Tell me something that frustrated you today”—oh, that’s—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —I want to be able to get those feelings out. Is that the same for you?

Brian: I don’t know if it’s the same, but I think if I am engaging my wife I would rather have a more pointed question than just—“How was your day?” It’s like—“Well, I”—

Shaunti: So—“Tell me something that felt awesome.”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: “Tell me something that frustrated you.”

Brian: Yes—“Tell me something that frustrated you.” It’s the art of a great question.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I think because women have no problem feeling in that gap—like if I were to ask you, “How was your day today?” I mean generally you—I mean if I were to ask Jenn, “How was your day today?” she’d feel in the gap.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: But for most guys, if the feeling, especially, was—“I’m ending the day, and it feels like quicksand”—that’s my last impression of the day; whereas if you force me to go, “Hey, where did you feel like you won today?” or “What was something that really frustrated”—like—“What was the most frustrating part of your day?”—and we do that with our sons because I mean they are grunting already; you know? Teenagers.

Shaunti: Yes, I have a 15-year-old son too—yes; exactly.

Brian: I mean you know the pain, and to try to uncork that stopper is tough.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: So, trying to get real specific, I think, is helpful.

Shaunti: I’m putting myself—in sort of—back in the last couple weeks. I’m thinking about a couple of occasions where I felt like I could pull some stuff out of Jeff about—you know he’s got the startup that he’s working on in addition to all the research with what we’re doing for our next book, and he’s juggling a lot. I know it’s got to be frustrating for him.

So, you know I was able to pull some of that out—some of this stuff about the meetings that happened that day on his new thing; but I felt like it was a crazy day, and he couldn't hear me. I really needed to be able to unload. I needed to be able to share what was going on.

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: It's also important in a marriage. I mean just so that you're not disconnected; you know? The classic thing is: Jeff will say, "Because"—he said this the other day—"Because my friend's son just had that baby three months ago"; and I went, "Wait. What?"

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: "They had a baby?!" He's like—"Oh, I guess we don't talk"; you know?

Brian: Oh, I'm glad Jeff has the same problem I have—selective forgetfulness.

Shaunti: Exactly. So, but he needs to know—how do I, as a wife—how would Jenn best approach you? Your brain is mush. You've had quicksand. Maybe, the day has been great / maybe, it's been horrible. If the water level has gone down and you're able to hear more—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —but how does she do it in a way that doesn't seem to overwhelm you after what you've already gone through that day?

Brian: Yes. Maybe, you pick out one or two things; and you just ask, "Hey, can I share something that was really exciting today?"—

Shaunti: Okay.

Brian: —or "Can I share something that was so frustrating?" I heard one comedian talk about—"I wish that my wife could be more like *SportsCenter* where I know when she's wrapping up her point because you hear [imitating music]"; you know?

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: "It would be nice if there were signals going—'Okay, is this going to end, or I am entering into another whole'"—

Shaunti: Story?

Brian: —“story, open-ended type deal.” It’s more like—“Hey, here’s a segment of my day.”

Shaunti: That’s really good.

Brian: Then to respond back and ask, “What about your”—obviously, you wouldn’t say segment; but as a wife, I’m sure you can think in those terms. If it’s just—“I’m going to launch into this open-ended thing where I don’t know when it’s going to end”—I think for a guy, especially if he’s been full that day, it makes it even—

Shaunti: Harder.

Brian: —the water keeps coming in.

Shaunti: You know it’s interesting you raise that because one of the research studies I did a number of years ago was helping women understand men that they work with; okay?

As we were writing the male-factor, one of the things I was doing is I was interviewing these guys about—you know these corporate guys / workplace guys—not necessarily corporate—it could be a mechanic—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —you know?—whatever—you know workplace stuff. They all said something really interesting; and it relates to what you just indicated which is if they don’t know where the story is going, it’s harder to listen. It’s the reason that guys love the conclusion up front.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: I had one guy who said, “As my wife is telling me this story, I don’t know whether she’s going to end with—‘So, isn’t that interesting? or ‘The house burned down.’ I don’t know where she’s going.”

Brian: Yes, give me—

Shaunti: “I can’t listen. I’m on edge.” That’s actually interesting that you say that because I think there is, maybe, something to that—is to pick something and to say, “I had a hard time with this. Can I talk this through with you?”

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And keep it as a limited thing and tell him up front—“I had a hard time”—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: —“with this.” So, he knows where he’s going.

Brian: That’s interesting, too, that guys wanting to have the conclusion up front—to even say, “My kids—I was so frustrated when Palmer did this”—

Shaunti: Oh, interesting.

Brian: —and then lead up with—

Shaunti: And then tell the story.

Brian: —and then tell the story. It’s like the way—again, going back to *SportsCenter*. If you could just think of your husband’s mind like *SportsCenter*, he has no problems watching the highlights. He doesn’t have to see the whole game.

Shaunti: Interesting.

Brian: But if he sees a highlight, he may want to see the rest of that play. So—

Shaunti: Interesting. I like that analogy.

Brian: That might be a good “aha” moment—

Shaunti: Absolutely.

Brian: —for a wife to think through it like that. That’s interesting. Well, that’s a great question that we got.

So, just to reiterate, Shaunti, we asked the question, “Why does it seem like my husband ignores me and the kids when he comes home from work?” So, give me one or two things that you go—“Here’s what you need to do, ladies, if your husband is doing that.”

Shaunti: So, let’s just say there’s basically one, two, three. So, first, I would say just recognize, literally, his brain is different. He doesn’t care less. This is something he wants to be able to engage with you, but literally, he is run out of words or he’s in quicksand or—whatever. That would be the first thing.

Then, secondly, give him that time—whatever you guys determine is easy. Like, you—you make dinner; and then as you cleanup, Jenn asks you—“You know, hey, do you mind if I sit? Can we run something—can I run something by you?” That works for you. Find out what that thing is for you and your husband. How much time he needs?

Then, third, when you actually do talk to him, apply some of these tips that we've been talking about. Apply some of this awareness. Sometimes, it actually helps him listen in order for you to say, "So, here is what our kid did today that drove me nuts." Then tell him the back story.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: That will help him listen. Actually, acknowledge, "I know that—I know that you've had a really hard day. Give me something that was particularly frustrating to you. Tell me something that actually happened that was good."

Apply some of those things that are more bite-sized—the ESPN, 15-minute—
[Laughter]—15-minute segment version.

Brian: You can even add in the [imitating music] right when you're done.

Shaunti: I'm wrapping up.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Those—if you apply those, you're going to get a much better conversation. You'll have much better engagement and feel close to him rather than like you've been frustrated at the end of a day.

Brian: I think, every marriage, we long—I think in this podcast and in what FamilyLife and what Shaunti is all about is bringing those couples together when everything else seems to be pulling you apart. We want to do that. So, for you as a wife to know how I can better come together with your husband, I hope some of these suggestions have really helped.

Maybe, there are some things you are doing well right now in that regard. Think back to this podcast and think of one or two things and go—"I do that. I let my husband just kind of escape a little bit when he comes home," or "I don't engage too much until after we've had some time together"; or maybe, it is—I heard one wife say that yes, she'll play a video game with him and then start engaging with him as he's playing that. There might be something that you do that you think back and go—"I've been doing that." Great—keep doing that.

But maybe, there are one or two things you are thinking through, and you go—"I'm going to do that a little bit better. I'm going to lead with a conclusion. I'm going to paint a segment. I'm going to make sure I understand that my husband might be coming out of work feeling like he's in quicksand." Just some of that awareness, hopefully, will help.

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