

326: How to Emotionally Co-Regulate with Your Partner (with Elizabeth Earnshaw)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Jen Riday

[Vibrant Happy Women](#) with Jen Riday

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You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday, and on this episode I am so excited to be talking about why it's essential that we address our nervous system regulation before we ever try to change our behavior or our spouse's behavior in a relationship. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey there, my friends, welcome back to Vibrant Happy Women. I am so excited for this episode today. I'll be interviewing Elizabeth Earnshaw who will be talking with us about mental load, and stress, and overwhelm. And how all of these physiological states in our bodies and in our nervous systems impact our relationships and how we must regulate our nervous systems. And thereby coregulate with our partners before we ever hope to change our behaviors.

This area has largely been neglected in the research and in the marriage books that are out there but it's starting to take hold. And I have personally experimented with this just focusing on staying emotionally regulated and helping my spouse to emotionally regulate. And it's making a huge difference, so huge that I have created a free workshop to share some of the tools and strategies my husband and I are using along this line of regulation for our emotions and coregulation.

And that workshop is called Making Your Marriage Emotionally Safe. And you can watch it immediately, it's available at jenriday.com/safe. When we are regulated we shift out of that fight or flight, out of that flooded state of cortisol and adrenalin that makes us reactive and less empathetic. And

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then we can more easily connect and empathize which is what we all want all along. We want that emotional connection, that emotional intimacy. We want to feel seen, and heard, and valued.

So, check out that workshop, it's at jenriday.com/safe. And also, now this interview which we're going to be diving into in just a moment with Elizabeth Earnshaw. Elizabeth is a marriage and family therapist and also a Gottman research expert. She has been trained in all of these areas. If you've heard me talk about John Gottman before, John Gottman kind of coined the four horsemen of the apocalypse which are behaviors that are predictive of divorce in marriage. And those behaviors are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

Well, we're going to talk a lot about criticism and defensiveness. My partner has typically been highly defensive largely based on the criticism that he received as a child and some of the trauma he has experienced as a child. And so, in this episode I talk with Elizabeth about how do you handle that defensiveness? How do you help your spouse or partner shift back from seeing you as a threat or as thinking they're bad to feeling emotionally safe again so that they can hear you and empathize with what you're saying? How do you do this? Well, we answer this question in this interview.

Now, before we dive in I want to share our review of the week. This is from Corgi Magic, I love that. Corgi Magic wrote, "Jen is the real deal, an authentic woman who tells the truth about her life and shares great advice to make your life vibrant and happy. I love this podcast and frequently listen to episodes again and again. I'm not a mom yet but the information Jen and her guests share is perfect for all women. I learn so much as I walk my dog and drive to work. Great tips on energy, management, selfcare, meditation, family life and more. Thank you, Jen."

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That makes my heart sing because it is my intention to help you unleash your best self, your calmest self, your most grounded self, your most present, empathetic, loving, purpose filled, and connected self. This is what it really means to be our best selves and to live our purpose. And that's why I'm here. So, thank you for writing that review. Everyone else, leave a review for us on your podcast platform of choice, whether that's Apple Podcasts, or Amazon Podcasts. We appreciate every one and we read every one and we might share yours on the air.

So, my friends, let's dive into this awesome interview with Elizabeth Earnshaw. She really, really is smart. I already promised her that she can come on the show again. In fact, I invited her, and I rarely do that, so she's really good, you're going to love this. Let's dive in.

Jen: Hey, everyone. I am so excited about today's guest today. I am here with Elizabeth Earnshaw who is an expert on relationships. And I'm going to let her go further than that and introduce herself. You're going to be so excited, we're going to be talking about a ton of things like mental load, John Gottman, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, our nervous systems and how that relates to relationships. So, hang in tight, you're going to love this. But first, Elizabeth go ahead and introduce yourself.

Elizabeth: Well, thank you so much for having me today. As you said, my name is Elizabeth Earnshaw. I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist. I'm a certified Gottman therapist. And I've been practicing for over a decade now. I've worked with hundreds and hundreds of couples which is wild to think about. I've had thousands of hours with couples. And it's still one of my favorite things to do. I co-founded a company called Ours where we work with people who are just starting their relationships right now.

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But ultimately we'll be supporting people every step of the way along their relationship path. And I'm also a mom and I would say that that's my biggest job out of all of these things that I do, most stressful job that I have. And I live in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

Jen: Awesome. Welcome to the show. I'm so happy to have you.

Elizabeth: Thank you.

Jen: So, you have this amazing level of expertise about relationships. So, my first interesting question is, what have you seen happening with marriages and relationships with significant others throughout the pandemic period, how is that different from before the pandemic and then now I guess?

Elizabeth: Yeah. It's interesting what I've seen and also I recently conducted a survey of couples. We did a state of relationship survey to kind of see what happened after COVID. And what I've seen is very similar to what showed up in the survey which is that people had very mixed experiences with their relationships. So, a little over 30% of the population said that their romantic intimate partnership became closer because of COVID.

And to give a little context around what I saw around that is that when I was working with couples the people who became closer were the ones who were having conflict because of all of the things that COVID changed for them. So, for example, prior to COVID these were the couples who were spending three hours on the road getting to the office, dropping kids off at 5:00am for daycare, picking them up at 7:00pm having no time together. And so those couples all of a sudden got to spend more time together. They didn't have the stress of traffic.

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They maybe one of them had a change in the way that their work looked. And so, they came closer together. Some of their stress was reduced. Other couples said that, I think it was about 20% of couples said that it ripped them apart. And what I would say is that those couples were the couples who prior were already struggling with being able to navigate conflict and stress with each other and that being together more was actually problematic for them.

That they were able to kind of imagine that those problems weren't there when they were busy all day. But the moment that they had to deal with things in real time with each other, it was just too much.

Jen: That's so interesting. What about the other 50%, they're just kind of the same?

Elizabeth: So not many people said the same. The other group said that there was mixed, that in some ways it brought them closer to their partner, and in some ways it brought them further apart. I mean that makes a lot of sense to me. It's like, it was great because now we have time where we spend together and we're actually talking. And at the same time, I'm kind of frustrated with the way that they navigated x, y, and z.

Jen: Right. I think I fall squarely in that 50%. Some good things, loved the decrease in stress, the togetherness but also sometimes too much togetherness.

Elizabeth: Too much togetherness is not always great.

Jen: Yeah. Well, thanks for sharing that. That's super interesting. It felt like at times during the pandemic that everyone was getting divorced,

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especially a lot of big name celebrities and do you know, was the divorce rate higher during the pandemic or as a result of it?

Elizabeth: I think that we'll have to wait a little bit for the data because people are probably still filing and going through the process. I would say yes, I would think that the divorce rate likely went up because people are having a reckoning in many ways. We've seen people leave their jobs at a significant rate. I think we're going to see that relationships have then changed, ended, left at a significant rate as well because it's been this period of reflection like is this how I actually want to live my life?

Is this good for me? Is it good for the other person and can I make hard decisions? I think we'll see it goes up, but I also do believe, I could be wrong about this, I'll have to double check, but I think also marriage rates went up during the pandemic. And my guess is it's the same thing. People are like, we've been waiting, let's do it, life is too short, we should do this thing. So, we're having the most weddings that have ever happened this year.

Jen: Yeah, I've heard. Oh, my goodness, event planners are dying, but loving it too.

Elizabeth: Dying but also probably really happy to be making up the lost incomes for the last two years.

Jen: Yes, for sure. For sure. Well, so that data you shared with us, it's so interesting, part of marriage success then it would sound like, I mean there's so many factors, but I guess we could zero in on these two. Part of the success is just calming our nervous systems and reducing the mental load and the stress. And then the other piece is communication, we're

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going to talk about both. But tell us how you've seen mental load affect your clients and what is mental load even, define that for us.

Elizabeth: Yeah. So, the mental load and easy way to think about it is it's having to remember to remember. So, it is everything that you keep in your head, but if you didn't keep it in your head, your household, your relationship, would fall apart. Even people have to carry mental load at work. And so, it's everything that's in your head, it's not the physical labor, that's in addition to it. But for example, it might be having to remember that you've got to submit your kids' field trip permission slip by Friday because if you don't then they're not going to have a spot.

Having to remember that you've got to pick up everything for meal prepping on Sunday, on Friday because on Saturday you've got a busy day and you won't be able to do it. Having to remember that it's your partner's mother's birthday and that you've got to send the card today, that the lights need to be changed in the house because they're about to go out. So, it's all of this work that you're doing in your head and it's exhausting. And with the couples I work I have found that this is one of the biggest issues that is causing relational distress in current times.

In the past we had different paradigms for how people worked together in a relationship. And now that's changed so we have a lot of dual income households. In the past there weren't as many so maybe you were the one taking on the mental load, but you weren't taking on the, you know, leaving the house at 6:00am and being out of the house all day. But now both people in the relationship are getting up, going to work, dealing with all of that. And then at the end of the day they're coming home but one thing has not shifted.

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The paradigm of dual income has shifted but there is not dual remembering, dual mental work. That has not shifted. And so, what's happening is women are still taking on the majority of the mental load in their relationships, while also adding on even more income bearing work into their lives. And as you can imagine and if you're listening, you're probably like, "Yes, I do all of that in my family and I also don't get home until 5:00pm. And I'm also the one doing the work around it. I'm going out and weeding the yard and all of that."

And so, if we're going to more evenly distribute household income and work, we have to really work to distribute the mental load. And mental load causes tons of stress and resentment, and ultimately conflict.

Jen: So how do we do that? How do we share that mental load? I'll just say, I've experimented with this. If I just completely drop the ball on something it will take a while of pain, but my husband will eventually pick it up and do it in his own way. But I don't want that pain of dropping the ball to get him to pick it up.

Elizabeth: Totally. So, it's hard, we're going to have to raise a generation that is able to do this without that pain. But we're not there yet. And so unfortunately, some of changing it is really having to take a stance with yourself, that you are going to allow some balls to be dropped. We're not going to let nobody pick up the insulin for our child who has diabetes. That ball's not going to be dropped. But we might have to let the tree in the backyard die even though we know that if we would have just sprayed it with something it would have lived.

Jen: Yes, that's a great example.

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Elizabeth: And we might have to then let partner clean up all the branches of the dead tree even if that doesn't happen until the grass dies underneath all of the branches. The problem that we are facing is that we've been socialized to notice all of these things. We're not noticing them because it's inherent to us. We're noticing them because when we were growing up, we saw role models doing this.

We saw a mother maybe saying, "Oh my gosh, look at that cobweb in the corner." Or, "I just remembered, Dan", my dad's name's Dan, "Dan, I just remembered that the girls didn't send their permission slip, can you bring the checkbook in here." And so, we've modeled ourselves after that. And we have done it in our play even. We play house, we think about, oh, no, the house doesn't have the groceries it needs.

Jen: Yes, oh my goodness.

Elizabeth: So, we do all of these things, we are babysitters as our first jobs. And so, we learned initially through pain points. I babysat and I learned, I didn't think about that ahead of time, I didn't think I should bring the sunscreen with me to the pool and now I'm taking these sunburnt kids home to their mother. And the mother's going to ask me what happened. And so, I had to learn in those moments, take sunscreen with you when you walk these kids to the pools.

Jen: Yes, that's tricky.

Elizabeth: Now, my husband watched men when he was growing up. He modeled himself after men. So, he learned physical labor, he learned to play with the toolbox. He learned to go outside and kick a ball around. He didn't babysit. His first amount of time with a baby was when we had a baby. And so, none of this is second nature to him, he hasn't had those

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pain points. This isn't to be apologetic for him, he's an adult and he needs to learn to do it. But it's to recognize that it's not going to happen overnight.

And so, if you are the person that carries the mental load, you have to have that recognition of I'm going to have to allow ourselves to have a growing period here where I set boundaries for myself. This isn't a punishment, it's boundaries for yourself. It's saying, "I'm really tired at the end of the night. I'm not going to do one more thing." And if the kids' permission slip doesn't get signed then I'm going to say, "Oh, wow, we didn't remember to sign that", when my kid says something. "Hey, Andrew, did you know there was a permission slip in that bag that we needed to sign?"

And it becomes our issues together. But that's not the only thing you do, the other thing is making it visible. So can you sit down together and actually write it out, Eve Rodsky is an author who wrote Fair Play, and she has a great activity you can do where you sit with your partner with five core categories, wild card. So, who of us takes care of it when the pipe burst, or the car breaks down on the side of the road, or the kid is sick at school. And writing down all the wild cards you've had over the past year. Who's taking care of them and does that feel fair?

Who takes care of inside of our house? Writing a huge list, all the things that you do inside the house. We have dishes that we have to do. We have laundry, vacuuming, seeing how it's distributed. Who takes care of life outside the house? So, who runs to the grocery store? Who picks people up from playdates? Who runs to the bank? Distributing that. And then looking at something called magic which is my favorite which is who makes our lives magic? Who's the one that remembers the balloons and date night, and twinkle lights during the holidays?

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And seeing how it's distributed. Sometimes you might be surprised, and you might be like, "Wow, my partner actually does a lot more than I was giving them credit for." And sometimes you might be appalled, and you might have to distribute it differently. In my marriage, we went to a counselor after my son was born and we were appalled. My husband was even like, "Oh God, this is really bad. I need to be doing more stuff."

Jen: And I love that. You're a therapist yourself and you went to a counselor, I think it's so essential to have these containers where an expert holds space for us to discover things about ourselves, so I think that's great. Well, that's fascinating. Magic, I never thought about that. I used to be all the magic.

Elizabeth: Did you?

Jen: But now as I've become tired, I'm a mom of six, so this year I said to my husband, "I'm not helping with the Christmas tree." And I just said it and he just did it. And it was fine. I adjusted a few things secretly after he went to work the next day. But he can do magic, I just didn't let him before.

Elizabeth: He can do it.

Jen: And I notice a lot of women will complain about their partner not picking up the slack. But I think they're missing the essential step of you have to stop and let it drop. And we can't just hand them the ball sometimes. You have to let them pick it up. I don't know about your husband, but my husband doesn't love when I assign him things to do. But if I drop it, if I say, I'm not doing it, then he has the choice in the matter, and he'll pick it up most of the time anyway.

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Elizabeth: Interesting. That's what my husband does as well. When I have just made, I don't want to say a hard line because that sounds aggressive. But when I've said something like, "I'm not going to get the mail out of the mailbox anymore." Guess what? It still gets out of the mailbox.

Jen: Isn't that cool? Yeah.

Elizabeth: It is cool. It might be a few days' worth, but it comes in the house at some point.

Jen: Exactly, yeah. Does it make sense to try to divide tasks on who likes doing something more? I mean how do you decide who does what?

Elizabeth: Yeah. So, I think there is a few things to think about. One is definitely who likes doing it. So, research has shown it doesn't need to be equal, it needs to be fair. So, the fair word is about who likes it and who can. So, I love magic at this point in my life. I would actually be very annoyed if my husband was like, "Honey, to take it off your plate, I planned a whole birthday party." I'd be like, "You've just broke my heart. I want to plan the birthday party." So, I like it right now. I want that.

So, if we sat down and we looked at our tasks I feel like it's fair. And that when he wants to be a part of it, I want him to be a part of it, of course. But I'm so happy doing it, it's so fun for me. Now, you want to look at what you like of course. But there also might be periods of time and I think you gave a great example of this, where you not only like it, you love it. I get the sense that you love the Christmas tree. But you can't do it anymore and you can't do it because you're tired, you're sick, work has changed, your body has changed, any of that.

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And so, these things can also change quickly. Next month I might say to my husband, “I love usually doing the beach trip, but I can’t do magic in the beach trip, can you please do all of the reservations? I’m so tired.” So, being able to negotiate this regularly, but it mostly falls into what can you do and what feels fair. And being able to dance around those two things together.

Jen: Yeah, that’s so interesting. So, it sounds like it’s a conversation we need to continually be having, analyzing, assessing. I used to do all the shopping and cooking when I was more of a stay at home mom. And then when I started working outside of the home, we had this conversation, and my husband was all about the groceries and the cooking. And sometimes I’ll want to edge back in there, I want to cook sometimes. And my kids, it’s so funny, they forget, I cooked for 15 years. They believe now that I’m not a good cook.

Elizabeth: Oh my gosh. You’re like, I literally did it for over a decade.

Jen: Yeah. I taught, every recipe that dad cooks, I taught him. They just stare at me like it can’t possibly be true.

Elizabeth: Oh my gosh, that is so ridiculous.

Jen: Yeah, so it’s so funny to change kind of how you do things and be flexible. I love this opportunity and I’m curious to see how my kids play things out. Another thing I don’t do is sew. And if anything’s ripped, I’ll say, “Find dad. I don’t care, I’m not doing it. Find dad, see if he’ll fix it.” And he’ll usually figure it out. I love this.

Elizabeth: That’s great.

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Jen: Yeah. So maybe my sons will sew for their kids as well.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And I mean I think that's where this shifts. I think it's going to be very different even in 10 years from now. Similar thing, I used to be the one that did all the drop-offs and pick-ups for everything. And it changed during the pandemic. My job became more demanding, and my husband's became less demanding. And he does all of the drop-offs and pick-ups. And my son doesn't even remember that I used to really kick my butt to do it because I had to – this was when I was still driving into an office at 6:00am getting him up.

And he's always like, "Is it the daddy who usually does the pick-ups? I can't wait to be a daddy and pick up my kids from school." And I'm like, "Yeah, exactly, you will be a daddy that picks up your kids from school."

Jen: That's so, so great. I'm still waiting for the day when I hear that I want more women doing the auto repairs and all that really manly stuff up. It's not me though, not yet.

Elizabeth: It's me.

Jen: It is?

Elizabeth: I love doing that. Yes, I love it. I like a drill and I've gotten really good at knowing how to drill, where to drill and my husband hates it.

Jen: Really? Wow.

Elizabeth: Yeah, it's a really funny split. He'll try to do it and he'll put a huge hole in the wall. And he's like, "Never mind, Liz, just you do it."

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Jen: That's great. I love that. That's so great. Well, so that's the one side of the coin, balancing the mental load. Now, talk a little bit about central nervous system and regulating our emotions because that can really play out. You can become critical when you're feeling anxious and tense. You can snap when you're feeling depressed. How do we improve our relationships through regulating our own nervous systems?

Elizabeth: So important. So, I think that people can become really frustrated or even feel hopeless sometimes because they listen to all of these tips for building relationship skills and then it doesn't work in their relationship. So, they'll say, "Well, I tried to say it the way I'm supposed to say it, or I brought it up at this time and it didn't work." And what I'll usually ask them in those moments is, "Well, what's happening in your body?"

Because you could try all of the tricks and all of the books about how you're supposed to express yourself, or the words you're supposed to say. But if your body is feeling dysregulated in those moments, it doesn't matter because it's not going to go in the way that those books say it's going to go. And there is a few reasons for that. One is that because you're feeling dysregulated, all sorts of things are happening in your body. So, your voice is literally changing. It gets more aggressive sounding, no matter what.

Jen: Wow. I didn't know that.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And you can think about when you're upset, no matter how nice you try to sound, it doesn't sound nice and it's because your mouth is tense. So, you're saying things out of a tense mouth and your throat is closing up. It kind of makes sense in an evolutionary sense. I'm overwhelmed, back up. It's our bodies are trying to make us protect ourselves. And so, if we're stressed out, what we call flooded, all of these hormones are being released in your body.

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And those hormones, you might be saying nice words like I feel really sad but your voice, the way that your face looks, and then your ability to engage with whatever comes back at you is not going to be relational anymore. We begin to lose our relational skills the more and more overwhelmed, and stressed, and threatened we feel. I'm not talking about somebody's physically hurting you threatened, I'm talking about there's an end game that you want, and you feel it's not being heard.

Something's been triggered in you from the past that was threatening, and your body is experiencing it that way. You start to actually lose a lot of your brain capabilities. So, the first to go are your ability to be curious. So that's why when people are angry they're not able to say, "I'm mad but I can hear your perspective and I want to hear what you're saying, can you let me know?" They're not doing that and if they are it's a got you, question. But didn't you say x, y, and z, and it's not going to go anywhere.

We lose our ability to be affectionate, then in an evolutionary sense it makes sense. If you feel threatened by a tiger, you're not going to hug them. But when you're in an argument with your partner, sometimes it can be helpful to be able to reach over and take their hand and say, "I know we're disagreeing, but I love you." But you can't do that if you're flooded. When you're flooded you're not able to process in the same way.

So, a lot of people will notice that they can't get the words out of their mouth. It's at the tip of their tongue and then they walk away, and they say, "There was 20 other things I wanted to say but I didn't express them." And that's because your brain is slowly turning off all the way to your brain stem and it's just doing the things to keep you alive. So, if all of this is happening and you don't know what to do to regulate your body, it's going to be really hard for you to navigate conflict because of the way that you're going to engage with it.

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The first step is learning, what is happening in my body. So, your heart rate is probably beating really fast. Your muscles are tensing. Your brain is speeding up to keep you alive while closing off brain resources it doesn't need. So, I'm going to keep the heart going, I'm going to keep their muscles going, I'm going to keep their nervous system going. But I'm not going to have them have a sense of humor, that's going to go out of the window. So, it starts to close all of that away. And you will start to get either high energy or shut down.

And if you can begin to recognize these in conflict the only skill you need in those moments is to be able to say, "I've got to take a break", that's it. You don't need to keep talking. You don't need to do anything. I've got to take a break, I notice my heart is racing. I notice my mouth is getting dry. I notice I can't even look at you. I keep looking away to soothe myself and I'm not hearing what you're saying. I need to take a break.

The other reason this is important is not just because of how it's impacting you. But human beings are fascinating in the fact that they either dysregulate with each other or coregulate with each other. So, I could say not a word to you right now. And if I was dysregulated in my body, our interaction would be different than it is at this moment. You would feel it somehow and you would walk away from our interaction saying, "That was kind of weird. It wasn't going smoothly." And you and your body might start to feel more dysregulated and uncomfortable.

And I think all of us have had those experiences where it's like, why did that conversation go really well and then this other conversation didn't? But I entered both of them the same. But I left them both feeling very different. We pick up on very subtle cues that somebody is dysregulated in their body. So, if I'm coming to you and I'm really upset about something and I'm not able to take deep breaths and slow my heart rate you are going to then feel that and react to me.

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And we see this all the time with the mental load stuff even, partner comes home from work, they are stressed out, somebody says, “How was your day? I really need help. There is 80 things going on in the kitchen.” And then the other person says, “Whoa, I just walked in the door, why do you have to act that way?” If one of those people, just one could have said, “My body feels out of control right now. I’m not going to say anything.” That interaction could have been different. So that stressed out person comes to the door, “You need to help me, put down your purse.”

And the other person says, “My body feels out of control, I’m going to make my voice really quiet when I talk to my partner and I’m going to say, “I’m just going to go to the bathroom, and I’ll be right down.”” Just doing that, not only soothes you but it also soothes the other person’s nervous system.

Jen: So coregulation, what an advanced thought about how marriage could be. I mean I think we’ve spent decades focusing on how everyone should behave and it’s now you’re taking us to the next level which is how do we regulate and then let’s do the rest after that.

Elizabeth: You just said it so beautifully. We spend so much time talking about behavior which is really important. I truly believe in fake it till you make it. So, it’s like you’ve got to have some behaviors that you can try on and practice, and things change. But it does not matter if you’re not coregulating with each other because your bodies will be in control. Your bodies are in control before any cognition that you have. And so, if you’re able to soothe your body, that’s so incredibly powerful and almost come naturally after that.

Because if you’re in a calm state you can have a sense of humor and laugh at how ridiculous your lives are together. You can reach for each other’s hands. You can say, “Oh my gosh, you’ve brought this up before, I love

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you, I'm going to listen to it again." But you're able to sit with each other. But you've got to be able to manage your bodies.

Jen: So, this kind of brings John Gottman's four horsemen of the apocalypse to my mind. So specifically, I think the order that they are usually listed is criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and contempt. I don't know which order they go in.

Elizabeth: Yeah, you've got it.

Jen: Okay, so defensiveness seems to be a strategy people have when they are overwhelmed and that's one of the predictors, high predictors of divorce. How do we kind of combat that defensiveness in ourselves and maybe not for our partners but to help, how does that coregulation work with the defensiveness piece? It seems to be related somehow.

Elizabeth: Yeah. So, all four of them certainly happen because we're in dysregulated states. And they also create dysregulated states. So, if you were defensive and calm you're going to make yourself more dysregulated anyway. And you're also going to dysregulate your partner. So as just a quick refresher, defensiveness is when someone brings us a complaint and we then block it out by doing a whole bunch of interesting things. So sometimes defensiveness looks like saying, "Yes, but." Sometimes it looks like playing a victim.

You're always so mean to me, why do you keep bringing this up? Sometimes it looks like counter complaining, I'll do the dishes once you clean the car. Or you say I'm not affectionate, but I would be more affectionate if you weren't such an A. So, we counter it. Sometimes defensiveness is overexplaining which personally for me is so hard to deal with when I hear someone overexplaining. I'm like, "I don't need all the

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details. I was just bringing one thing.” But that’s a normal and common response.

So, it’s saying something like, “Well, I know I was late, but I was in the car and then when I was in the car I stopped at the 7/11 and I had to call so and so. And also, you didn’t tell me exactly at this time. And let’s look at the text messages.” And so that’s another form of defensiveness. Now, there is a behavioral thing that we need to do with that but there is also an emotional and physical thing that we have to do with that. Because if you’re not letting somebody in with their complaint there’s probably something going on with your body.

It automatically triggered maybe a shame wound which starts, that’s threatening. So, everything we can track it back to threat, but it starts with something. Being ashamed is threatening. I don’t want somebody to think I’m bad. I don’t want somebody to think I don’t care about them. It’s normal as a human being to want to kind of protect your honor and to stake a claim that you’re good. And so, people get defensive to prove that they’re good. You might get defensive because maybe you truly can never do anything right in the relationship. Maybe there is a constant finger pointed at you.

And you’ve got to a point where I’m not going to deal with this anymore and I feel angry. I feel threatened and I feel angry. And so, my anger is coming out as blocking this out. Now, that all makes sense and it’s not going to get you where you want. So, if it’s a shame wound and it’s, I feel bad, and I don’t like people thinking I’m bad so I’m going to hide behind it. How can you work on knowing that it’s normal for humans to not be perfect and that it’s very healthy just to take responsibility for that? And the behavior then is being able to say, “You’re right, I am late.”

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Or, “You know what? I could have done a better job at checking the text you sent. I definitely did not see the time. That’s on me. I didn’t really look at the message”, period, that’s it. If it’s the anger wound because you really are in a relationship where someone’s just always picking on you then how do you set boundaries? It might not be that you take too much responsibility in those moments. It might be that, you know, Gottman talks a lot about the antidote to defensiveness is responsibility taking.

But I also think there are moments that I have seen where defensiveness does come from non-stop criticism. And it doesn’t really necessarily help to go, “You’re right, I suck all day long, all the time.” But it also doesn’t mean you have to become that way back. And what you can do instead is you can kind of ground yourself by breathing and calming your body. And then saying, “I need to have a line here.

I’m really happy for us to figure out how to do x, y, and z, and you can’t come at me all day long. Let’s find a new way to talk about this because if you bring it up in the middle of my workday, I’m not going to be able to be there for you so can we talk about it later?” So having boundaries is an antidote to defensiveness too.

Jen: That seems huge. Yeah, one boundary I have kind of been playing with, with that kind of thing, with one of my kids in particular, sometimes my husband is, “Thank you for that feedback, I’ll think about it. Do you have anything positive you want to share right now as well?”

Elizabeth: I love that.

Jen: And they look at me like, positive, what’s that? And it does grease the wheels and then they’ll, “I like your hair today.” They’re trying, but it does

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kind of help me meet a need there to have the positive interaction, so I love that.

Elizabeth: I love that. Yes, talking about the need. It's like, yes, I can totally hear that I upset you and I'm really glad that you brought that to me. And I really need to know how am I shining for you. What am I doing right? Because it's very hard for me to hear again and again that I'm not doing it right. And it of course is going to send you into a dysregulated state if you never feel like you're doing anything right and your partner's not showing appreciation. And if you have a highly defensive partner, that's really exhausting.

What you can do on your end though is check in with yourself. How am I bringing things up? So, this goes back to coregulation. Am I bringing them up in a way that is respectful, that shows that I still value and like them as a person? Honey, I made all this dinner and you showed up 20 minutes late. I feel really frustrated about that. That's an okay complaint. It's different than you're such an a-hole and you're always late, and you never care about us and I'm done making you dinner. So, can you bring it up in a way that tells the other person you're not going threaten you, I am just telling you?

And then also, can you check with yourself, do I express as much gratitude and appreciation as I do complaining? And if I don't, I need to do that more so that my partner has space to actually receive my complaints.

Jen: So, a compliment sandwich, the compliment then the complaint.

Elizabeth: Compliment sandwich.

Jen: Then the compliment. That's so fascinating. So, I have what I would consider a highly defensive husband. He might say the same about me, I'm

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not sure. But my belief is that he's highly defensive due to past trauma with his own mother. I think there is some projection that goes on that he's not aware of. What are some strategies to help a partner coregulate when they're really quickly defensive even when you're doing all the things you're supposed to do behaviorally?

Elizabeth: Yeah. That's very common and it's a common dynamic to have somebody be defensive and the other person be the one that has to bring up the stuff. And it's challenging, we have that in my marriage too. And something that's been helpful to me, and I have seen has been helpful to others is owning what you're seeing. If you know that person really well, if you know what the wound is, so going back into, let's say it's a shame wound. Your example was it's like a trauma wound.

Narrating out loud that this isn't the same. I'm not saying you're bad. I literally am not saying you're bad. I love you. I am saying I need your help.

Jen: Interesting. So really spelling it out, first grade level almost, without condescension of course.

Elizabeth: No, being genuine. If you're dysregulated it'll come out as contempt. And this is where coregulation comes back in. If you start to get dysregulated by their defensiveness and I can say from experience, what I'll start to do is I'll see that as yucky. Why are you being a child right now? And that's not maybe the exact words I would use. Maybe I have used something similar though. I have said, "That feels very adolescent to me."

Jen: Yes. Are you 13?

Elizabeth: Are you 13?

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Jen: I have said that.

Elizabeth: I have said, “I’ve brought up a complaint and I thought I brought it up in a lovely way. And I received defensiveness.” And I’ve said, “The way you just talked to me is like a teenager.” That’s me coming from my own dysregulated place. If I hear somebody talking to me that way, being able to have my own boundary and say, “I hear that whatever I said is something that’s hard for you to hear right now and I want you.” I think another powerful thing is saying, “I want you to be able to tell me whatever it is that you’re trying to explain right now.

And, not but, and, I need to know that you just heard what I said. And that you’re hearing it how I’m actually saying it. I love you. I am not saying you’re bad.” When my husband gets defensive it often becomes everything’s bad. “I do a lot for us.” “You do a lot, I know that you do a lot. I’m just coming back to this one thing. And I need you to hear just this one thing, apart from all that other stuff. I know that you do a lot.” And so, in order to be able to do that though you have to be in your body.

You have to feel calm enough to do that. If you’re not it’s better just to say, “I’m not having this conversation right now and we’ll come back to it later.” I’m like, don’t engage, because engaging in a defensive battle, it then makes you have one of the four horsemen where you’re going to be critical or contemptuous and it’s just going to go back and forth. And one thing I’ve had to own is as much as I want to tell my husband he’s defensive, I’m critical. I’m a critical person. And I need to own that, and I need to take responsibility for the way that I bring things up, or the things that I bring up.

Sometimes I’m complaining about something that by tomorrow was going to be washed off the driveway or something, it doesn’t even matter.

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Jen: Yeah, guilty as charged as well because I've been, you know, you said, we women have been programmed to see everything. Bringing up all these things we see probably does feel like complaining, even though we think we're being helpful, yeah.

Elizabeth: Well, and we're overstimulated. And all those things are threats to us and so that's why one of the biggest problems in a relationship right now is the mental load because I think that it's causing women to have to live in kind of almost constant threat state of if we don't do this my kid is not going to be able to get into the daycare. If we don't do this our house insurance is going to lapse and then our house is going to burn down and we're not going to be able to pay for a new one. If we do not do this I will get pulled over because the car registration is not accessed.

So, there is all of this threat and then there's partners who are saying things like, "It will work itself out." And we're like, "No, we are very stressed and worried about very real things." And so, I'm not surprised that we're often saying things in a critical way because it's not being processed just as, "Hey, babe, I just need you to help me with this." It's like, "If you do not help me with this next week's going to be horrible."

Jen: Yeah, explaining the consequence so they can connect it, yeah, that makes sense. So, during those moments you find yourself being hypercritical or hyper aroused, what are your personal favorite ways to re-regulate your nervous system?

Elizabeth: So definitely breathing is really important. It's our body's natural relaxation system. And most of us don't really do it throughout the day. We get enough oxygen to keep ourselves alive. In modern times though we are breathing into the top of our lungs and moving forward. And so, when you're feeling dysregulated, being able to take deep breaths into your belly,

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you want to actually imagine that as you're breathing it's filling your body up with air so you can actually feel it fill behind your shoulder blades. You can feel the air fill in your lower back and then your belly kinds of moves out.

And you feel like you've become wider as a person because you've just filled up your body with air, that part is really important, slowly breathing out. The other thing that can help you to soothe yourself if you're feeling this way is to recognize that your muscles are automatically tensing. You don't have anything to do with it and that's why you might look aggressive, because your brows are furrowing. Your lips are pulling back. It's interesting, our lips pull back so that we show our teeth which is really a cool way that humans try to look threatening and protect themselves.

But all these things are happening to your muscles when you're upset. And so being able to recognize your muscle groups is really powerful. Squeezing your hands really tight and then letting them go, squeezing them really tight and letting them go, bring your shoulders up to your ears and pull them down. And these are things you can do while you're having a conversation. You can, "Honey, I'm really feeling irritated. I just need a second." And actually, trying to relax your body.

If you tense your muscles and let them go, you're teaching your body that it has control over letting the muscle go. So, if your face is tense just furrowing your brow even harder and then loosening it is really powerful. Another really important thing is being able to separate from whatever the stimulus is that's upsetting you. So, if you're in the midst of an argument it's okay to take a break. Say, "Let's sleep on this, let's take a walk. I'm going to go hop in the shower."

And while you're in the shower or while you're taking the walk, not thinking about the argument. But focusing mindfully on one thing, which might be

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the shampoo bottle if you're taking a shower. What can I read on it? What are all the colors on the bottle? What does it feel like? What does it smell like? If you're on the walk, I'm just going to focus on the trees. I'm going to really pay attention to those. We know that it takes about 20 minutes of doing these types of things for a person's body to get back to baseline.

And so, if you can take the break and for 20 minutes you can just focus on breathing and distracting yourself, you're going to be better able to come back and bring up whatever the issue was.

Jen: I'm glad you mentioned distraction because I feel Netflix has saved many a moment in our marriage. Because your mind just stops ruminating and you can – I mean it might not be the healthiest thing but yeah.

Elizabeth: I go upstairs, I turn on the TV. I'm bratty, so I'll be like, "I'm not having this conversation, I'm going to my room." But then I watch TV and then truly, 20 minutes later I'm like, "Why were we having the conversation that way?" We do things differently.

Jen: I love that you're able to be really vulnerable. And you seem to be able to separate that when you're flooded, when you're in fight or flight, and all your adrenalin and cortisol is pumping you can be bratty. And we all can be bratty. And you're not afraid to say it because you know that's your reptilian brain and there's this whole other part of your brain that's a whole different person. So, I love that you don't add the element of shame and you're so real about it.

Elizabeth: No. And the more you can be open about it I actually think the more it changes for you. And something that has worked really well for me and a lot of the couples I work with is narrating it while it's happening. So, I will actually say, "I am so pissed off right now. I'm truly, I truly want to slam

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the door and be a brat so I'm going to walk away." I will say that out loud. I will narrate what's happening inside for me. And that helps a lot.

And when I've worked with other couples, they'll do the same. They'll say, "I really want to say something mean to you right now because I'm out of control and crazy. I'm taking a walk. Leave me alone." And being able to do that, to narrate instead of go into it, helps your partner also to be like, "Okay. Hands off for a little bit, I'm going to let you be."

Jen: Yeah, wow, that's cool, I'll have to try that some time. Well, this is so awesome. You have a book as well. Tell us the name of it.

Elizabeth: I do. Yes, I have a book, it's called I Want This to Work. And in the book I do talk a lot about what I call hot conversations which are the ones that are taken offline because of our nervous system and not because we don't have the skills. And I also give lots of prompts for conversations that you can have with your partner. And I of course talk about the good stuff too. So how do you maintain a healthy relationship with each other and connect, not just around conflict but connect around fun, and purpose, and your rituals and all of that kind of stuff.

Jen: That sounds great. And what's it called again?

Elizabeth: I Want This to Work and you can get it everywhere books are sold.

Jen: Okay. And if people want to connect with you online, where should they go?

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Elizabeth: If you want to find me online the easiest place to find me is on Instagram, my handle is @lizlistens. But you can also find me on my website which is elizabethearnshaw.com.

Jen: Okay, Liz Listens and elizabethearnshaw.com. Well, this was fantastic. I loved it. I'm going to think a lot about it and thank you for being on the show.

Elizabeth: Thank you so much for having me.

I hope you loved that interview as much as I did. Elizabeth is awesome because she understands how essential it is that we emotionally coregulate with our partners. When we create emotional safety then we can feel seen, and heard, and valued, then we can empathize, then we can solve the problems. But if you're anything like my husband and I used to be and sometimes still are but it's getting much, much better, you can't really solve problems when you're in a state of fight or flight, when you feel threatened, when you feel defensive, when you feel criticized.

So, I love this idea of creating emotional safety first. Again, if you'd like to check out my workshop on how to create an emotionally safe marriage, you can grab that, watch it immediately at jenriday.com/safe. My friends, I love you. I am grateful for you, you deserve to feel emotionally safe, and you can create emotional safety even if you have a trauma history, even if your spouse has some kind of trauma history, or even if you don't know all the right behaviors, we all can breathe. We all can use the tools that help us generate emotional safety. You've got this.

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I will see you again next time. Until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

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