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RHYTHMS OF A RELATIONSHIP

Interview with Rachel from LCC

Celia: I'm Celia Fielke from Messages of Hope. Relationships are part of all of our lives in many different ways. Sometimes they're easy going, sun shining and smooth sailing. Other times it can feel like you're in the midst of a storm with no land in sight. Spending so much extra time recently in close proximity to our families can be stressful and put a magnifying glass on our relationships. Coming up I'll be talking with Rachel, a relationship counsellor from Lutheran Community Care in Adelaide.

Rachel, we're not perhaps used to spending as much concentrated time with our partners in what can be at times quite stressful? Are you seeing this being played out more so in the people you're in contact with at the moment?

Rachel: Absolutely. In one of the first few weeks, a lady at work and I were just chatting in the lunch room and she said, "Oh, I noticed that I was getting very cranky. And then I realized I've had far too much time with my husband!"

Celia: In the nicest possible way.

Rachel: Exactly, in the nicest possible way. But you know, we love our partners, but it doesn't mean we want to be with them 24/7.

Celia: Especially if you're not used to it. I guess with this whole Coronavirus stuff, what's the key tension point for couples?

Rachel: In the current context, just the balance of time apart and time together, that's pretty tricky. So you lose your normal rhythms, you know, we get into rhythms with our partner of when we like being with them, but then we go "ah no, we've had enough." We need a bit of separate time. "You go catch up with your friends. I'm going to go catch up with mine, or I'm going to have a night at home, whatever I need."

But that rhythm is what's been disrupted. And so figuring out how to have those principles of time together versus time apart and that balance, it's a whole new thing to navigate.

Celia: Yeah. I know there are times where I really like people and I like being with people, but there are times where I just need to have that space.

Rachel: Yup.

Celia: Luckily my husband recognizes that and he just might throw me a bar of chocolate and then just retreat.

Rachel: Yeah. There's a lot of power, I think, like you're saying with you and your husband in recognizing it, and acknowledging it. Actually just being able to say, "I just need a bit of time out. I just need to go and scroll through Facebook or have a phone call with my mum or do whatever."

Celia: Cause sometimes you can take that personally, can't you?

Rachel: That's right. So if we're a bit narky at each other and a bit nitpicky at each other, it's not necessarily the other person that's the problem. It's the stress. That's the problem.

Celia: So stress is a big factor?

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely. When there are things happening that are outside of our control and unpredictable, that's an ingredient for stress.

Celia: How do you recognize that you're stressed before it's too late?

Rachel: Stress comes out in all sorts of ways. So looking at our emotions, we might be a bit more annoyed than usual, a bit more irritable. Feel a bit more sad. Appetite can be affected as well. People might eat more or they might eat less.

Celia: I know and that's not fair.

Rachel: Yes, I'm an eating more kind of girl too! We also might feel ourselves start to withdraw. And that can be a bit of a tricky one to spot in the pandemic but that's a good one to be aware of.

Celia: So how do couples manage that?

Rachel: I think it's about acknowledging it and being each other's safe place in it. That's a really powerful thing.

Celia: What do you mean by being a safe place, how can I be a safe place for my partner?

Rachel: You can be a safe place for your partner by listening to their experience and empathizing. So last week I had a rotten day, because I was just a bit over the whole thing. I missed my family at Easter and I wanted to go out and see my friends and I was a bit over it. My partner just listened. And I just talked about how annoyed I was and how sad I was feeling. And he listened and he empathized. That just calmed me right down.

Celia: So that's a safe thing. What are the opposites where I'm not meaning to, but I might not be a safe place for my husband?

Rachel: A really common thing that happens is that the other person tries to help by problem solving.

Celia: Yes. That's it.

Rachel: We try and problem solve out of the best intentions. We want to help. But often, what we need is for our emotion to be heard and our experience to be heard, and then we can problem solve, then we can deal with it.

Celia: Yeah. I know sometimes, because my husband's not particularly effusive and he'll internalize and think about stuff a lot more before he'll actually talk, whereas I'm a talker and I'll work it out as I'm talking to you type person. So I struggle with that and I jump in and I probably don't actually give him the space and that time. And I know that about myself, but I'm not very good at it.

Rachel: Well, how great that you know, it about yourself?

Celia: Hasn't made it any better.

Rachel: Well, relationships aren't about being perfect. A good relationship is about being able to repair those little breaks in connection that we have.

Celia: What about if you're in a relationship where communicating about the uncomfortable stuff has never been easy? What happens when you get stressed and frustrated and start to take that out on your partner?

Rachel: All of the intention under the sun is not going to mean that you never feel annoyed at your partner. It's about how we manage it. Emotions aren't wrong. Being annoyed at our partner isn't wrong or bad. It's what's what we do with it and how we repair that. A relationship is kind of like servicing a car. I make sure that my car is serviced because I want it to keep running. So we actually need to make sure that our relationship is running well and put effort into maintaining that in different ways.

Celia: So what are some things that can help us?

Rachel: It's not our responsibility to entertain our partner. It's not our responsibility to make sure they're happy every moment of the day. So you can actually have time apart while still being in the same room.

Celia: So it's recognizing that you can be in the same room and not talk. For example, if I said something like, "okay, when I sit in that beanbag with my book, that means just don't ask me anything."

Rachel: That's right. That's right. And then being creative about your time together because what do you do if you've got kids in the house?

Celia: Okay what do you do?

Rachel: Well, again, this is where we have to be really creative, especially in Covid times. So, you know, date night might be a bit out of reach at the moment, obviously. What about a date half hour? What about a date hour. What's a TV series that you can watch together? You know, have some time apart leading up to that but you agree that when you have this TV time together, you're not talking about the kids, you're not talking about the stresses. You're having some quality time together.

Celia: and letting the rest of your family know that, "okay, this is one hour. You don't come and disturb us unless an arm or leg is falling off!"

Rachel: That's exactly right. And setting those family expectations and regular check-ins as well as you go along. So, you know, every week have a bit of a chat. "Okay, what's coming up this week? What does it look like this week? Is school back for you? Or you know, Jamie might be at home and Sarah might be off at school, so what's that going to look like? What do we need to do as a family?"

Celia: So that you can have your time carved out.

Rachel: That's right.

Celia: So I guess being intentional about how you do things. With all of these things you're telling me, I'm thinking I should be taking notes!

Rachel: And look with all of these things that we're talking about, I think it's really important to acknowledge that these only work if you've got a foundation where your relationship is safe and respectful. So if one or either partner in the relationship doesn't feel safe or doesn't feel respected, this isn't going to work. If someone's in a situation where they feel like their opinion or their feelings aren't being respected or they're not feeling safe at home, then that's when they need to be perhaps reaching out for some extra help.

Celia: So what do you do for those people who are feeling like that?

Rachel: That's where the national family and domestic violence line, 1800 RESPECT is a really good resource and people can phone them 24/7, and then they can find a service in their area. So don't feel that you're trapped.

Celia: We've been talking about things that can help us keep the communication going so that we can understand our partners and are able to repair the niggling moments where things get tense. It's got me thinking about how my husband and I have got through tense times, and I think it comes down to the common values that we share. And also our faith in God.

Rachel: Absolutely.

Celia: God is always there.

Rachel: Shared values are very important. And that's the thing, isn't it? Because there are times when we don't like our partner but it's our values that are usually the reason we why we stay. That said, just because somebody has the same values or faith to you, it doesn't mean that they are going to be safe or they are going to be trustworthy. That's the trickiness as well. It's very easy in the context of a church to explain away things like domestic violence because the partner is Christian as well and that's where we're turning a blind eye to the issue. However, values are so important, and Jesus teaches me every day about grace. You know, it's not about being perfect. It's not about me being the perfect partner. It's not about our relationship being perfect. It's about knowing that we make mistakes and we can forgive and we can be forgiven and we can move forward.

Celia: When you said that about grace, that really struck a point for me that my husband gives me grace every day.

Rachel: That's right. And it doesn't mean ignoring issues. It doesn't mean letting them fester. It doesn't mean saying that things okay when they're not okay. But it means that, through grace, we have a chance to grow. We have an opportunity to address things that are wrong.

Celia: How would you explain grace?

Rachel: Grace is that we are loved and there is no shame. There is no fear. We don't have to be afraid of being rejected. Because of Jesus and because of who we are in Christ, we know that we are lovable and we are worthwhile. We can be firm in who we are as a person and as a beautiful creation.

Celia: And if you have that knowledge and take that into a relationship.....

Rachel: That's powerful stuff you see, because then that's what makes it possible to address an issue.

Celia: No matter where we are at with our relationships. God's grace and love for us never changes.

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