

Transcript for Entitlements in relationship with Russell Lemle Ph.D. and Robert Solley Ph.D.

Robert Solley

I'm Robert Solley. I'm an associate with a couple of Institute counseling service couples Institute and I have with me today Russell Lemley, who will talk about a very interesting idea that he's presented about entitlements and relationships. If you're ever You're welcome. And so can you tell us a little bit about yourself or kind of introduce yourself?

Russell Lemle

Sure. I'm a psychologist and been in practice for 40 years and for the last three decades my entire practice has been a couple's that's what he says relevance here. I do other things and other parts of my life but

Robert Solley

right so I'm just gonna let you go here on the idea of entitlements. Just tell us a little bit about the idea, and maybe how you arrived at it. And we'll go from there.

Russell Lemle

Sure. Well, in terms of arriving at it, as I just mentioned a moment ago, couples have been my primary interest for a long time and seeing the work of couples or certain patterns that became recognizable to me and this is just one of the ones that that that evolved really about a dozen years ago. And I wrote about it. So let me jump in here. Just elaborate. So the term entitlement really refers to a way that we talk to our partner to indicate that our opinion in a given situation has more merit, and therefore our way should prevail. And that and that comes up instinctually. Almost any time that you know what you want, what you desire, what you feel needs to occur, our brain starts generating solutions for what's going to help us to feel calm, please regulate, you'll say that's just what our brains do. So an example. So if I'm taking person, and a disordered house puts me out of sorts, a clean house is what's going to comedy, right? So my brain automatically constructs reasons why that should occur. Just yesterday, client told his wife that she had to clean up and the reason that he said is because his parents taught him right from wrong. So she had to comply.

Robert Solley

Right? So becomes a matter of standards.

Russell Lemle

Right? And that was kind of that was his brain telling him a reason why what was important for him around tidiness should prevent Right, right. Another example that came up this week, was a conflict with a couple around their child who was distressed. Both both developed an idea with the child needed, and then they argued about how their points should prevail. One claim that they knew more because they are experienced with kids and they read more. Right. The other claim is that their own childhood experience inform them what was the right thing to do?

Robert Solley

Yeah, so there's kind of justification but I like how you put it in terms of, you know, what we're really seeking as a kind of calm or a kind of, you know, to kind of soothe ourselves in a way that it comes out in the form of these kind of justifications or rules or standards. Yeah, yeah. Go ahead. Oh, I was just gonna say I forgot what I was going to say. So why don't you go ahead.

Russell Lemle

Okay, looking back to alright. But let me library a little bit of where I think you were starting, which is that you know, it's important to remember here but the nature of thoughts, you know, our thoughts virtually always feel right. In our gut. And so we stick with it. And then we get focused on outcomes because we predict, and I might add, we accurately predict about our own individual nervous system, what will settle it if it's done our way and what we do if we're on our own, and that's an accurate prediction. And what that leads to is where we're always wired to try to control our partner if we're emotionally activated, and it's not selfish. It's just human nature. And what's important also, I think, to recognize is that we're generally blind that we award these entitlements to ourselves. When we claim there's some rule accepted reason, we don't see that we're giving that entitlement to ourselves to prevail. It just seems that that is of course, the right thing to

Robert Solley

do. Just seems natural. Like you said, Yeah. i That reminds me of what I was thinking which was that Pete Pearson has a nice thought experiment that he does sometimes with clients and I do

too, which I refer to as the self standard exercise. And what you do is you ask the client, you know, to think of three people that embody different characteristics, and then you can make up any characteristic you like, like, think of somebody who's tall, think of somebody who's messy, think of somebody who's skillful. And then you ask them, okay, in all cases, once they've thought of a person for each category, you know, is the person more or less messy than you? Is the person taller or shorter than you? In most cases, they'll pick somebody who is more of the thing than yourself. So then the question is, who's the point of reference, in all cases, ourselves? So we sort of assumed that we're the standard, you know, and everybody else we compare to our own version. The the comedian version of this is to Carlin. What was his name? George Carlin? Yes, he said, Do you ever notice when you're driving everybody who drives faster than you as an idiot, or maniac and everybody who drives slower than you is an idiot. So same idea, we use ourselves as the reference point, people who vary from us are somehow deranged or, you know, in the worst case, right now. Okay. Well, it's kind of nice. I

Russell Lemle

elaborate on that. Which is that there's generally some merit to what it is that you wanted. And maybe we'll get into this a little bit further. When we talk about some clinical examples of what you want has merit and what's important here from a couples perspective, isn't whether or not your idea has merit or your own perspective as legitimacy. And no matter how sure you are that you're right, you just can't claim it unilaterally. Without your partner having equal say, right I mean, if you really understand what is problematic about what we're calling entitlements, it's this piece of it. It's it's the fact that right or wrong from your own perspective. It's how you implement it relationally and in other words, it's the process by which the two people engaged, it's important more than the outcome. And if a couple is collaborative in their decision making is more important than actually what they decide if what's important, which of course, couples therapy, what's always important is trying to create more connection.

Robert Solley 13:31

Yeah, so this kind of gets to another question, actually, that I was thinking about, which is kind of, you know, there's a I mean, I guess more on the collaborative front or you know, trying to find that line between what's collaborative and what gets more coercive, you know, or more kind of entitled, if we're using that term. Because, of course, you know, each person should be able to bring up their concerns, or, you know, reasons they think that a certain things should go a certain way. But as you said, it's a matter of how it's brought up. And, you know, how forceful it is, and, and we talked about earlier, the idea of unilateralism that this idea that it's sort of like my way or the highway, which is the way that often couples express it right partners express it.

Russell Lemle

That's right. That's right. You know, I like individuals and couples to have strong opinions. And the solution here that we're looking for, isn't for anybody's opinions to become less strong or even less forceful. That's probably a loaded term. You know. It's trying to find a way in your purse alluding to this to get to a both me and you way of discussing and resolving but if the meat part is strong, keep it strong. There's, there's a reason that it's strong. You actually want to kind of hold on to what's important to you and what's of value to you. What you think what you believe, you just have to view that as half of the picture because what happens is, when there are those strong reactions, we tend to see it as all of the picture and that's where it becomes unilateral.

Robert Solley

yeah, that's interesting. And I think by forceful I partly meant, you know, all my way kind of like that, my way or the highway. Sometimes it's has to do with one person getting more voluble or more, you know, aggressive in their movements, which sometimes can intimidate the other partner. So those are aspects of it too, but I like that idea of, you know, that, you know, comes from somewhere. It represents something important to the person. And so we don't want to take that away. Right. Although it also reminds me of the partners who say, this is just me you know, I'm not going to change which I guess might be another kind of entitlement. You know, like when when one partner is asking and the other one to kind of change and somewhere, respond to them in a different way in the park. And you know, the second partner says, this is just me I, you know, you take what you can

Russell Lemle

but again, what I mean, we're talking about some clinical examples here. Yeah. That's okay. As a starting point, from my perspective, if the person who kind of digs in and says, This is what's me, the inquiry is about and what's true for your partner too. So this is you. And what about your partner? Also? It's the frameshift isn't that any individual is wrong? Their individual is correct. After the picture here of a couple .

Robert Solley

Right. So it's there's that book you know, there's the book titled Do I have to give up me to be with you or something like that? And so your thought would be something like, you can be you, but we also have to include your partner.

Russell Lemle

Yes, yeah. Anytime that you act as if your partner doesn't matter, you're now with a basic way that couples fractured.

Robert Solley

. Right?

Russell Lemle

Yeah. And couples that come into couples therapy, or as always, in that state that we just described a second ago, which is everybody is dug in on their own half and aren't making space for their partners.

Robert Solley

Right, right. Okay, I'm going to look at my notes here for a second. Oh, let's talk about the this phrase that sometimes come up, comes up where a partner says, you know, I'm not getting my needs met. I need to get my needs met.

Russell Lemle

Yeah. Well, this is it's complicated, because in the culture that we live in, getting those needs met is something that is glorified. But it's potentially dangerous in relationships, because most of the time when that's expressed, it's expressed in a unilateral way. And it's just another entitlement, which is if I need it, you have to do it because it's a need. And then I crosses over into that kind of unilateral entitlement then becomes problematic. So sex is a great example. Of that, where I need sex to three times a week. So that's my need and therefore you're here to satisfying and yet expressing it that way. Is is going to be counterproductive if it's about my need. Rather than the two person solution, which ironically, is what's missing when it's an issue is that you know, if you come up with two person solutions, either unsex you're going to have the connection, any intimacy. And if you if you find a way to just have you have to do it because it's my knee is going to come up empty. Right. Right. So it won't even actually get you to where you're

Robert Solley

what you want. Right, right. Yeah, and I actually tend to downplay him in the idea of needs, I think in your oh, by the way, I submit and that you have an article on Psychology Today about this. Is that okay to mention, and, you know, people can google your last name LM. LEM li LM le Yeah, and entitlements and probably find it pretty easily that way. You froze for a second there. But I guess it's okay. We didn't miss anything. So, um, let me see. Anyway, I was saying I think that I downplay this idea of need because as you pointed out, you know, we can think of needs in all kinds of different ways, but really, the only things that we really seriously need are things like sleep, food, water. Yeah. And then beyond that, you know, it's I tend to put it more in terms of desires or wants or wishes, you know, because I think that just that word need kind of creates that kind of demand. You know? Yep. The demand feeling. Yep. Which also reminds me I was gonna mention Marshall Rosenberg talks about this and nonviolent communication for the nonviolent communication fans. He talks about a demand as a sometimes it's posed as a question from one partner to another, but it's a question that does not allow no as an answer, right. So that again, is that kind of unilateral quality where, you know, there's there's only one way to do it. And that's my way Yeah. And so, okay, good. Well, let me see what else I have here. I think we've covered a lot of us. I want to ask you about, you know, you've already talked a little bit in ways about how it might, how you might use it in couples therapy or might how it might come up. Can you say any more about the kinds of ways you talk about it with couples?

Russell Lemle

Yeah. So I think the starting point is the validation is that what people want and desire is important. Is is critically important. And people should know themselves and and hold on to what's important to them to learn that's a value to them. And hopefully, they'll know even why it's important to them. To Know yourself more deeply, where it comes from. Yeah. And that's gonna be helpful, ultimately for the couples to hammocks and breakthroughs but, but that's the starting point for both people. . Now I do a little psychoeducation just to let people know that our brains will prioritize what's going to settle us and regulate us. . I mean, that's, that's sort of the factory setting that we all come built with. . And, and it's sort of why couples will drift from their marital vows where people start out saying that they're there to vow ways to tend to their partner, but they drift backwards into self regulation. . Because that's really the setting where we start. . And I'd like to educate people to normalize. There's nothing shameful about this. This this behavior, this reaction because it's pretty natural, it's pretty instinctual. In our brains, so I I try and normalize it as best I can. And then still try to make them the next leap for people to change the way that they understand it to open the aperture that this is two people this is me and you. Were we start out with kind of what's gonna help me what's gonna settle me regulate me, please me, whatever me, and that's just what we do. And if you see it as half then you can reframe the process as an ampersand. It's me and you Yeah, then and then just to finish what you're asking is that I have couples practice. In many different sessions, some version of asking and inquiring what is their partner expressing? Right? What is important to their partner in each of them doing it? Then the critical step and then I'll lesson just not to say about that is to put words around telling your partner what's important to them, as best as you understand it. That is generally what's missing in these intitled conflicts is only articulating what's important to yourself. And you

get to this polarized standoff where nobody feels seen or valued, no matter what the outcome, right? And so you really have to practice and I do this in session with real examples, if they're struggling with instinct, what is important to you, right? And you say to them, and then switch off anyway. Right,

Robert Solley

right. And check and find and see if you're understanding correctly or refine your ask questions. That's important, too.

Robert Solley

you know, I think you've almost answered this question, really, but I'll ask it anyway, and then we'll see if there's anything new to say about it. But, you know, I had this question. Well, actually, let me preface it with saying I'm assuming that you might not sort of used the word entitlement. And with couples, you've probably just talked about the way we've been talking about it more in terms of that's true each person seeking comfort and having their values and

Russell Lemle

that is true, and it's not a real term. It's not a real therapy term.

Robert Solley

Yeah. And it's not a real friendly term, right.

Robert Solley

But you know, I so maybe the I don't, I don't even know if that makes this question irrelevant. But I had asked you before about this idea of partners using it as ammunition against each other, which is kind of like, you know, the question of if I'm vulnerable, is my partner then going to take that PHONER ability and use it against me, like if I tell my partner, you know, I was abused as a child. And that's why it's hard for me to regulate myself. Will my partner say, Oh, you're just getting upset because you were abused as a child, something like that. So in other words, you know, if, if the idea so I mean, you know, you've presented in this really nice light of kind of like, this is natural, which I agree with, and, you know, this is where we start. So I think

maybe if we're, if everybody's thinking of it on that plan, then it would be hard to really take this kind of a stance,

Russell Lemle

but no, but I think you have a good point. And many, many people when I start talking to him about this, they do some version of what you just said, which is that they start taking the notion of what we're calling entitlement here and see it in their partners but not in themselves. Yeah. Which is kind of just more of the same thing. Yeah,

Robert Solley

exactly. Right.

Russell Lemle

So it is until people learn. It'll just be another bit of ammunition just like, just like you said, Yeah. And therefore the way through that as the same thing we were saying a few moments ago, which is, why is your partner saying what they're saying? Right? It's important, even though that you think isn't understanding you? Can we slow down and really ask right because it's just a counter attack or a terror accusation. Then you're into the I need to defend myself against you. And I'm not interested in what's going on with you and all the expressions of disinterest in your partner, or the invalidation or what breaks kind of the trust and the marital bond. Good. Yeah, telling other what to do is about me, right? Sharing what's important to you and inquiring what's important to your partner is about we

Robert Solley

right yeah, that's a good way to put it. Okay, well, I think that's good for me. I know this is a brief treatment, but I think we got some good ideas out there. Anything that you want to add or highlight or that feel okay for you?

Russell Lemle

You know, the only piece I would underscore and you have already underscored it is that there's nothing to be embarrassed about if you're doing this. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Even if you get to the point of saying oh my god, I do that. That's often not even the first step it in the

way that I understand human psyches? I mean, this is hardwired and like most things in adulthood, we have to get beyond kind of an impulse to do things that are going to regulate us to get to a place if that's only half the story so that our partner doesn't get dysregulated.

Robert Solley

Right, right. Yeah. There's another quote that occurs to me from Pete Pearson that good communication is a series of unnatural acts. Yes, that's we have to kind of overcome our biology. In a sense. Yes,

Russell Lemle

that's exactly right.

Robert Solley

Credit. Well, thank you very much, Russell. It's been a pleasure. And hope we get to talk again. Me too.