

Alexandra Stockwell

Thank you. Okay, Alexandra, welcome to the show. I'm so thrilled for you to be here today.

I am too, thank you, Emily. I have been looking forward to our meeting. I always find it so interesting when I have people who are MDs who have made the jump into working with couples or relationships or who have written a book.

I just think that it is such a good indicator of a genuine care and concern for patient wellness. And so I would love to hear a little bit more about you and how you made that transition and about your background. Okay, wonderful.

That's so interesting. I thought you were going in a different direction as you said that, because for me, the caring and devotion to other people's wellbeing has always been there, but it's really a big step to go from essentially being a physician employee to being an entrepreneur, needing to promote myself so people read my book and promote myself so people know about my services. And so I will answer your question, but I just wanna say that that is actually one of the biggest differences.

So I actually studied philosophy and mathematics in college. And then I went to medical school and I did training in family medicine. And I had a small holistic practice North of Boston.

The first week of medical school, I met my husband, we've now been married 27 years. He still practices medicine. And in the mid 2000s, I took a sabbatical for medicine because I loved being a doctor.

There wasn't anything wrong. I wasn't burnt out, but I had worked really hard to get to that point, both personally and professionally. At the time we had three children and I just didn't feel satisfied in a way that I thought I would having made a lot of sacrifices, worked many 90 and 100 hour weeks and just done everything I was supposed to do in order to get to this result.

And I was there and it wasn't bad. I certainly wasn't complaining, but just at the level of a whisper, I felt not the kind of satisfaction that I thought I would. And I knew that while it was fine then, another three or four decades of practicing medicine in the same way, wasn't really going to make that voice go away.

And there were a few different flavors. One of the flavors of that voice is that I prioritize my patients over my family and my family over myself. And I did a lot to try to reorganize my priorities according to what I believe they were, but not according to how I was behaving.

I was used to getting a lot done so it was not a time management issue. And I realized I

just needed to step away, take a sabbatical to try to reorganize so that I was living in a way that was more aligned.

And I had this very funny thing happen because I volunteered at my children's school and within three months of taking this sabbatical, I was overseeing this huge project with 10 other people writing this 40 page review of a particular thing for the school, all volunteered. And doing exactly the same thing I've been doing before, but for a much less worthy cause, which was kind of devastating at the time, but also really confirmation that it was a good thing that I had stepped onto this journey to really learn to be more attuned to myself. And I'll just add one more thing, which is that in the process of doing things because I felt like it and just dropping a lot of shoulds and having more presence, more joy in my life, I got to where I really wanted to expand this into sensuality and sexuality.

And it didn't just naturally flow, like having more joy, more ease, more connection with myself. It was good, but it didn't just naturally flow into enhancing our sex life. And so I did a very in-depth training for personal reasons entirely for myself and my husband, and it doubled as a coach training, but at the time I didn't even know what a coach was.

But anyway, one thing led to another and I opted to do the coach track as well. Awesome. And so, yeah, I get that, that you had a sense that there needed, something needed to give, something needed to shift.

And I don't know if this played into that decision for you at all. I know for myself and I'm not writing a book as well, there's this sense of, the work I do with clients is so meaningful and I get so much satisfaction out of it, but I also wanna take what I know and share it with a wider audience, because when you're working with clients or with patients, you have that one-on-one time. And of course you get to know them and it's very in-depth, but I also got to a point in my own career where I felt like I had a lot of information to share and I wanted to spread the good news to as many people as I could and a book seemed like a really good way to do that.

Yeah, and I wanna add to this, I'm guessing that you have your way of saying what I'm about to say, but my way is that we are mammals and as mammals, we learn through imitation. And yes, we use our prefrontal cortexes to learn calculus and cell biology. But when it comes to how to be in a relationship, how to experience pleasure in our bodies, how to communicate well, that is all learned through imitation, through whatever modeling we've had.

And having a fantastic relationship is entirely a learnable skill. So if someone isn't having the sex they want or isn't having the relationship they want, it's due to a lack of education and a willingness to learn more than anything else. And so when people have questions, yes, I'm really glad to have my answer and I'm really excited you're writing your answer.

Yeah, and I would add to that and I'm curious what you think too. I think we are all predisposed to be in touch with our body and to mirror and to be relational. And I argue, and this is part of my own thesis, that it's not necessarily a matter of changing who you fundamentally are or learning something that is totally outside the box.

It's more a matter of reconnecting and rewiring yourself to get back in touch with what has maybe been there all along, but it's just been dormant or squashed due to family of origin issues or cultural issues or fill in the blank. I absolutely agree with that. And this is a subtle point, but it's why I think communication scripts or behavior modification can be helpful in accessing a new experience, but it's not actually enough to create lasting transformation.

And the main way that I talk about this is that's actually one of the central points in my book. The name of my book is *Uncompromising Intimacy*. And the reason I've named it that way is that really throughout the Western world, perhaps the whole world, the most common relationship advice that is given is that if you want a great marriage, you need to be good at compromise.

Compromise is what creates the best relationship. And that is completely wrong. If what you want is a pleasant, bland, conflict-free, passion-free relationship, compromise is your best friend.

But if you want juicy passion and ongoing growth and evolution and dynamic adventures of various kinds in your relationship, then uncompromising intimacy is the way to go. And I always wanna be sure to define it, uncompromising as I use it, it does not mean that you always get your own way. It does not mean some version of my way or the highway.

No, it's that where compromise is withholding your desires, your feelings, your challenges, kind of in some ways your native state, like you're referring to, although it doesn't always feel like a native state. But in other words, withholding what's alive inside you so that your partner is more comfortable, that's what compromise is. And so with uncompromising intimacy, I teach people how to bring the fullness of who they are and share it with your partner in a way that your partner can receive it and ideally opens and shares themselves too.

Because if we kind of check parts of who we are at the door, when we come home, we don't have all of ourself available for pleasure and passion and sensual connection either, because there's no magic switch that if we're dialing down or making dormant aspects of our soul, then when we're in the bedroom, we don't have access to all of our body either. I totally agree with you. I always say that you cannot separate your sexuality from your individuality.

And so anything that makes you who you are is going to show up in the bedroom. And so

if, like you say, you are withholding parts of yourself from your partner, even from yourself, I think a lot of people don't realize. For sure, for sure.

How much they cut off, then that is gonna show up and the sex is gonna feel bland. What I hear you describing is things like authenticity and transparency and total vulnerability. Yes, absolutely.

And I still have like rolling around in my mind that our sexuality, how did you say the phrase sexuality represents our individuality? But you can't separate your sexuality from your individuality. I'm so aligned with that. I haven't heard it expressed that way.

And I think it's such a beautiful truth. And yes, so authenticity, vulnerability, transparency, all of that is part of uncompromising intimacy. The thing is that anyone who's a fluent English speaker knows those words.

And until it comes time to apply them, we all think we know what that means. But actually each of those can be dialed down. Like when my husband and I got together, he is very book smart.

He's a Harvard graduate and such a thoughtful man, but he just didn't really know what to do with all of who I am. And I at that time wasn't anywhere near as expressed as I now am at the age of 54, but I was way more expressed than he was. And he used to say to me, I wish there was a manual.

I wish I had a manual for women and specifically for you. And I was so kind of socially intuitive that I used to just think he was making a joke. Like I would just laugh it off.

But over the years, I came to really appreciate that actually he genuinely wished there was a manual and that has informed how I write and how I coach. I'm not dumbing anything down. These are very profound matters, but I think that even being vulnerable, being transparent, being honest, being self-aware, that those can be dialed down into clearly understandable bite-sized steps that over time get built up to feel very natural.

But I think most of us do not arrive in adulthood with a clear ease in being vulnerable. Oh, definitely. Again, I think it's something we're all predisposed to do, but then you grow up and you get messages that tell you not to be vulnerable.

You get messages like children are seen and not heard and don't speak your mind or put your hand down or don't ask too many questions. And by and large, we start to shrink down until we're completely out of touch with ourselves. So you wrote a manual for your husband, it sounds like, with your book.

I'm curious what his reaction was to the whole thing. Because actually I wrote my book, I have a lot of men who read it and get benefit from it, but I wrote my book as though I was writing to a woman because at that time, I had way more women reaching out to

me. But now actually, especially since the pandemic, I have a lot of men reaching out to me as well in heteronormative relationships.

So yeah, I would say that I created a living manual in learning to speak to my husband and say, first of all, I needed to know what I wanted and to say what it is. Those are two skills that I really need to develop. I mean, it's easy to be like, that's wrong.

That's not it, that's not it. But that really isn't setting anybody up to win. And so I love kind of orienting to the fact that hidden in every complaint is a desire.

So if you are listening and you would find it difficult to actually say in the positive form how you want your partner to communicate with you, touch you, all the things, that it's fine to start with the complaints and even write them down and then just be really objective and clear. Like, okay, if that's the complaint, then what is the desire? For example, if your complaint is, my husband never pays attention to me, then the desire is that my husband be more present and pay more attention to me. And saying the positive form is a much better setup for your partner to actually be able to do it, not just because they're less likely to feel defensive and shut down or be angry and just less open to what you're asking for, but it also gives them something clear.

Like it's like giving the destination so then they can map the route to get there. Exactly, I love that analogy actually. And yes, I totally agree with you rather than saying you never do this or you never do that or you're bad at this or bad at saying, hey, what I need more of is this and just opening the door so that they can hopefully walk through.

You know, a lot of what you're saying I think is more intuitive for women. Of course, there's gender differences all across the board, but I'm curious how your husband has responded and what he would say that he's learned about being more vulnerable and open, because I don't know that it comes as, well, I don't know, I'm going back on my own words. I was gonna say that I don't know that it comes as naturally to men.

I think it does come naturally, but again, I think because of gender socialization, they're told to get out of touch with their emotional experience. So how has he learned? Yeah, I just wanna affirm that. I mean, there always are exceptions, but by and large, and whether it's true for children who are four-year-olds now is not part of our conversation, but for men in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, by the time they're four or five years old, the main emotion that most boys are allowed to feel is anger and sadness, fear.

Those are not really acceptable. So like many, my husband was bullied a lot in his elementary year. So between not really having space for many emotions and being the emotional support for his mother, at least, I don't know if she would agree with that.

I've actually never discussed that with her, but that was his experience as his parents

got divorced and then she was a single mother for a little while. And being bullied, all of that made it super unsafe for my husband to even go there. And the way that he had success in life, and he's had some real success, it did not happen through slowing down and figuring out what his feelings were.

So we've had many phases with this. The first phase was when I would say to him, why are you angry at me? And he would say, I'm not angry. And I didn't really believe him because to me, he felt angry.

But I needed to learn to believe him because I wanna be his lover and wife, not his mother. So I needed to just go with what he said and respect that. And that was a very important part of our journey and his journey.

Then the next thing is that over time, he realized that when I would say, are you feeling sad or are you feeling angry? Because that's what it would feel like to me, that he got to saying, well, I definitely wasn't aware of that, but you're often right so let me get back to you. Okay, so he started considering what you had to say.

That's right. And I really actually appreciated that he did it that way because I don't wanna be the authority of his emotions, even though there are many times early in our marriage where I was more aware than he was, like that's not a good role for me to have for either one of us. No.

So anyway, that was the next phase where he would consider it. And also it just wasn't safe in his life for him to say how he felt. And it's nice to think that it was safe to tell me, but I definitely didn't always make it safe.

Like I discovered that, yes, I wanted him to be aware of his feelings and share them so we could be more connected, but then there were certain feelings that he had that I just had like a haughty response to, or I was really uncomfortable and didn't really know what to do with it if my man felt pathetic. Like that was not something that I enjoyed. And so I'm gonna say a little bit more about his growth, but I really wanna emphasize that there was quite a learning curve and lots of two steps forward, one step back, four steps back, two steps forward as I needed to be attuned enough to my own experience that I could be present and objective and not take it personally when he would feel one way or another, because that just reinforced the whole thing that it wasn't safe for him to feel things if it was gonna then determine how I felt too.

So all of this happening in the eclectic mush that is an evolving growth-oriented relationship and now he definitely knows how he feels and it is extremely rare for me to be attuned to it and him not. And the only times that happens are when he's very stressed and that's gonna happen in reverse too, that when I'm stressed or overwhelmed or I have a big deadline or something, then I'm not gonna necessarily notice that I'm hungry, for example. So it has been a confronting evolution for both of us and worth

every step of the way.

I'm glad to hear that, because I know that what you're describing can be kind of an uphill journey for a lot of couples and it really takes, I think, a commitment to the relationship from both people to navigate that terrain and deal with the two steps forward, four steps back that you're describing. And I also think what you're describing is like the word we use a lot in relationship therapy is having healthy differentiation, being able to soothe your own emotions, be aware of and manage your own thoughts and feelings while at the same time creating space for your partner to express their own. And I think a lot of times we think of two people in a relationship as either being really distant and fully autonomous or overly close and meshed, but what you're describing is differentiation, which is the ability to do both at the same time, to be able to stand on your own two feet and to leave space for your partner to stand on theirs.

Absolutely, and when I'm coaching couples, I have a number of exercises specifically designed to consciously choose and collaborate together on the culture of the marriage because every marriage has its own culture, its own norms, its own ways of being with one another. And if a couple is together, some of those are working really well. And if a couple hasn't really taken some time to be intentional, there probably are a number of rules of the kingdom, so to speak, that are worth looking at and experimenting with whether or not other ways might be better because so often two people give the same thing different meanings.

And really, sometimes I say to clients, you know, what is the purpose of your relationship? A question that I've never had anyone think about and talk about before receiving this question. And I think it's really relevant for modern relationships because in the past, the purpose was very clear. If you were European aristocracy, then it was to maintain peace in the region.

If you were in certain circumstances, it was a business transaction between the fathers. Like in some context still, it has to do with procreation and a religious mission. And that certainly serves many couples, but so many couples, they have love.

They have attraction, hopefully. They have common values, maybe, probably to some degree, but why you're actually together, plus or minus whether or not you intend to have children is a question that's really worth asking. What are you getting and what are you giving? And if it's just to have someone to grow old together with, that actually is not very helpful in the decades until that's relevant.

If you are 74 and you're getting married, then the purpose of growing old together is magnificent and soulful and really honest. But really considering, what is the purpose for each of you and for the two of you together and for your impact in the world, that can be very helpful in providing a container that provides positive fuel as things come up and need to be navigated. I totally agree.

I think this day and age, we have all these, without realizing it, because as you say, a lot of couples don't talk about it, but haven't really thought about it. But I think what most people would agree on these days is that we have more esoteric needs that we want met through our relationship and from our relationship. We have a desire to be fully self-actualized.

It's just these kind of higher order, more philosophical needs that we want to get met through and with our partner by our side. So there's of course a friendship and a companion element, but it's so much more than that. Because if you rely on that 100%, you're probably gonna have a passionless relationship because you need some of the other stuff in there as well.

Yes, exactly. And I think somehow the tendency is still to grip to the idea that our partner should make us happy. And that idea is, it directly flies in the face of becoming self-actualized.

And so these are the dilemmas and we don't have much modeling. We don't have even that much language to discuss that this is the case. And if we're not in the habit of putting attention on this, it's not easy to get started.

I have been in coaching sessions, whether it's a couple or an individual where I'm coaching a woman. Let's say she's 44 and has two kids and a successful career. And from the outside, it looks like a great marriage.

And I say to her, what do you want? I don't mean what do you want with the relationship, like just what do you want to be experiencing? And she knows exactly what everyone in her family needs and wants and how to provide that. And maybe she says what she wants is for the house to be clean, which is a desire, but that's not really what I'm talking about. That's relatively superficial, though important.

And if you haven't been asking yourself this question, whether consciously or not, most people just are numb in that department. And to just start to notice, okay, well, do you prefer tea or coffee? That's a good starting place. And whichever one you're gonna drink, take a moment to be mindful and allow yourself to enjoy it and have just the right amount of sweetener or milk or the temperature.

The more specific one is in terms of what kind of water you like, what kind of beverage, what kind of flowers bring you the delight. These are the ways to then be able to know what you want when it comes to sensual experiences as well. Totally, I couldn't agree more.

You mentioned successful women who are doing it all. And I think that's another big difference of marriage this day and age is it used to be these very clearly defined gender roles, which we don't have anymore. And that I think brings with it a lot of mostly

wonderful things, but also some pitfalls as well.

And you talk about in your book that it's a common struggle for successful women not to feel very supported by their partners. Can you speak to that a little bit and explain why that is and what people can do? Yeah, absolutely. So for any woman who is high-performing, high-achieving, ambitious, she has cultivated particular qualities to be able to get there.

It has to do actually with being to some degree disconnected with her emotions. I don't mean robotic, but if you have an exam tomorrow, then you've got to stay awake and study. You can't just indulge when you feel like, well, I don't really feel like, no.

Like you have got to override a lot of bodily and emotional sensations in order to be successful. And sure, that can happen later in life, but for most women that has started by high school. And the thing is we are rewarded for it.

We get to do more meaningful work. We get educational opportunities. We get more money.

And maybe it includes also just the discipline to work out and manage the people in your world. And fundamentally, that is not a way of being that includes really being supported. It's very much, we have to do it for ourselves.

Even if we have mentors and we have colleagues that we appreciate, you know that the buck stops with you. If you want something to happen, you've got to make it happen. Yeah, it's kind of a whole, like you become a human doing as opposed to a human being.

Yes, yes, exactly. And so then there's of course a situation where let's say such a woman has a husband who is focused on his career, like isn't actually interested in being supportive. That's one scenario that I'm not gonna speak with, speak to. But there are many men who actually would like to support their women, would be willing to help out more at home if she allowed that to happen. And the thing is that it is really risky to give up control. And I'm talking about how the kids are dressed, what is served for dinner, when the dishes are done, whether they're done.

Like there are so many decisions that any self-respecting, high-achieving woman is used to making and having things done the way she likes them done. And part of allowing ourselves to be supported means letting go of control, which is unspeakably risky and vulnerable. And if that's not something you're used to doing, it can feel like when you loosen your grip, everything might fall apart.

Which it doesn't. It doesn't, but it really feels like it might when you're used to everything being on your shoulder. So if you're listening and this is your situation, I highly encourage you to start with something that's benign.

Like ask your husband to replace the toilet paper. And if you like to have the top of the toilet paper go on top and he puts it in so it's on the bottom, do not say anything, because even though you're used to it your way and you think you'd really prefer it that way, it doesn't matter. So start with things that don't matter and just be glad and actually express your gratitude without saying, but next time, would you please? It is a whole skillset to just stop and be grateful.

Totally, I couldn't agree more. I was very fortunate after I had my daughter, my first child, to have a doula who ran a mom's group. And so everyone who she helped birth, who had babies that month, we were all in the group together.

So we all had babies the same age and I'm still such good friends with them. That's wonderful. It was so wonderful because she gave us all such great advice. And I'll never forget one of the first pieces of advice that she gave us was not to micromanage and to give our partners space to figure out their own way of doing things.

And it is advice that I really took to heart. I mean, just this morning, my husband dressed our son in like red shorts and a pink shirt and I was like, you know what? That's what he's gonna go to school.

And like, they did not coordinate at all, but you have to decide just not to sweat the small stuff and not everything has to be exactly perfect all the time. And I tried to be thankful instead that he took the initiative to get him dressed and it was fine.

So I think that's great advice. I love that example because most likely it doesn't matter to your son at all and you get to grow and open more. And your husband gets to be more useful and contribute more.

And that has positive effects for him and his relationship with your son and with you. And I just wanna honor your doula because I got that lesson in a very different way, which is that when my first child was born, we used cloth diapers. And I, after washing them, I wanted them folded in a particular way because they fit in the drawer and it was more convenient when I then reached in to get the cloth diapers if they were positioned in a certain way.

Anyway, so I was sitting with the baby, I was exhausted, I was nursing. And my husband who was a third year medical student when she was born and just working incredibly long hours, but he was like awake enough to be helpful and had taken the initiative to fold the diapers. And so what did I say? I asked would he do it the other way and proceeded to give all the reasons why my way was better.

And this was unusual for my husband to speak this way at that time, but he must've been so exhausted. He just stopped what he was doing, turned and looked at me and he said, Alexandra, if you want everything done your way, then you're gonna have to do it

all yourself.

Love it. He set the boundary. I did not love it at that time, but I absolutely love that he said that because I would have just continued bossing him around indefinitely thinking I was being wise and helpful.

Yeah, yeah. Well, Alexandra, it has been such a pleasure speaking with you. Where can people find your book and learn more about you? alexandrastockwell.com. That's my website.

From there, you can go to my podcast, The Intimate Marriage Podcast. You can download the first chapter of my book, see all the things that I have going on. And if you wanna reach out and send me a message through my contact form, I love hearing from people.

I will definitely respond. And all of that is at alexandrastockwell.com. Awesome. Well, thank you so much.

I'll be sure to link everything in the show notes and I look forward to speaking with you again soon, hopefully. Thank you, Emily. Take care.