

EAVESDROPPING ON COUPLES COUNSELING

For their special issue on marriage, New York Magazine sent a couple to William J. Ryan, Ph.D., for one 3-hour couples intensive session. Dr. Ryan permitted the couple to record the session for publication, yielding a 60-page transcript. Beyond provided the therapy services, Dr. Ryan takes no credit for the published product. As it turned out, New York Magazine published a moment, a few pages, reprinted here.

From New York Magazine

MARRIAGE: AN INVESTIGATION APR. 3, 2019

This 40-something couple started seeing a therapist a year after they married because they weren't having much sex. A decade later, they had a three-hour session about the same problem with Brooklyn couples therapist William J. Ryan. Here, excerpts from the conversation.

Jack and Claire, 11 Years

William Ryan: I'm going to ask you to try something right now, Jack. Scooch up really close to Claire and put your hands on her cheeks.

Claire: Oh, boy. We have a hard time being sincere.

Jack: Do I squeeze them like this?

Claire: We have a joke about squeezing cheeks.

Ryan: Okay, so gaze into her eyes instead ... Is that comfortable, Claire?

Claire: -Ish. Sure, okay. That's better.

Ryan: Look into her eyes and say, "Claire, I love you so much."

Jack: Claire, I love you so much.

Ryan: Did that land, Jack?

Jack: Yes.

Ryan: Okay. And say, "Claire, everything that's mine is yours."

Jack: Everything that's yours is actually mine.

Ryan: Ah, okay. Not the time to play.

Jack: We're jokers. Okay, everything that's mine is yours.

Ryan: Does that land?

Jack: Not as well. I think that you're about to go to the heart of the matter, that in our relationship, at least in the beginning, Claire was much more successful than I was. I don't make that much money.

Claire: That's not the heart of the matter, but—

Ryan: Claire, Claire, don't dismiss this. This for Jack might be the heart of the matter.

Claire: I think it certainly was an issue earlier in our relationship—

Ryan: No, Claire. You know what I would suggest? Don't tell him your story. Find out what his story is still, now.

Claire: Well, how do you feel about that now?

Jack: I feel like I don't know why we are in a sexless marriage. Like I don't turn you on for some reason, and part of it is that I'm not as successful as you would hope. Like, what is wrong with me that my wife's not attracted to me?

Claire: There isn't anything wrong with you. There's stuff that's wrong with us. I mean, okay, I wondered if it was money early on, because we were both looking for a reason for the problem, and so I thought, *Maybe there's a power dynamic here that isn't sexy.* And it wasn't that sexy. But now you make more than me and it didn't alleviate the sex problem. I think it's because there's so much acrimony in our relationship that I don't feel free with you. And then sex atrophied ...

The irony is I think we're getting along kind of better, just in the last few months, and I feel flickerings of desire sometimes — they're not that common, but I do have them. But it's very hard to act because I don't know if I'll want to see it through.

So I have said this before, and I don't know how to change a thing that's set in your brain, but it's not about the money. It's certainly not about the way that you look. I mean, I love the way that you look. I have since we met.

Jack: I still think that if you see someone who's more successful, that brings a glint to your eye, where you see money or wealth.

Claire: Success, not so much money. But I'm not drawn to other men. I mean, I am — but you're also drawn to blondes with big boobs. I'm not trying to make excuses, but a lot of what you're attracted to is things that I don't have. Outdoorsiness, more of a free spirit. But most of the time I don't really internalize that, because we chose each other.

Jack: Well, I would say that for me right now, the lack of intimacy, the sexual rejection—

Ryan: You're watching Claire, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Ryan: Her face is redder. She just swallowed very hard. This is the dashboard; these are the indicator lights. And if you don't know what they mean, you've been seizing the engine.

Jack: What's happening inside of you?

Claire: Shame, I guess. The sexual problem is really my problem. It's my fault, and I've condemned you to live — you have the choice of living with me and not having the intimacy that human beings deserve or of not living with me.

Jack: That's my worry, that there's not another option.

Ryan: Don't do that yet, Jack, all right? Pretend this is a really sensitive moment and you want to lean in and hold her hands and let her know you're interested in hearing about this bad experience she's having.

Jack: I am. And are those the only two options?

Ryan: No, but don't even go to options. It's not about *doing* right now; it's about *feeling*.

Jack: Okay. I'm sorry that you feel that shame.

Ryan: And maybe you contributed to it?

Jack: Do I?

Claire: I don't know. It feels both like a thing that I did myself — I didn't set out to do it, but it's a phenomenon that happened in me — but also like a thing that we compounded together because we did not question it early enough.

Jack: Do I make you feel ashamed?

Claire: I feel blamed.

Ryan: Yeah, like it's me.

Claire: It *is* me.

Ryan: Not necessarily. And Jack doesn't do enough, if I may be so bold, to reassure you that you can find a way together, that it's not just your fault.

Jack: I guess I thought that's what we've been trying to do with couples therapy.

Ryan: But in couples therapy in the past, Claire felt blamed because you were the pursuer—

Claire: I don't know how you get away from that paradigm, because at its very simplest, Jack wants to have sex and I don't.

Ryan: I don't think you can honestly say, "I don't want to have sex. I can go the rest of my life without having sex and be happy."

Claire: No, I want to have sex. I want to *want* to have sex. Can I just ask a question, though? I know we're having a moment and we're holding hands, but I believe Jack *does* think it's my fault.

Jack: No. I mean, I wonder what's wrong with me. Like, am I not doing something right?

Ryan: Tell him he's mean to you and when he wants an apology from you, he won't let up. He's too harsh.

Claire: I don't want to tell him that. I don't want to blame Jack for something that is wrong with me.

Ryan: Okay. So you need to hold all the blame, Claire?

Jack: I am sort of in despair about how we get out of this thing together. I mean, I don't blame you.

Claire: There have been conversations about, like, "You can't go on like this, you're not gonna stick around." So, I mean, it's okay to say you blame me. I think you should be honest.

Jack: I don't blame you. I'm just sad I don't turn you on.

Ryan: If I were in your shoes, Jack, I might be saying something like "Claire, I blame you for not telling me where the key is to unlock this riddle of how to seduce you."

Claire: If I knew where the key was, I would've shown you a long time ago.

Jack: Can I just say that when we talked about acts of love not landing, you know, I think in some ways my whole life is an act of love ... that doesn't land.

Claire: What do you mean?

Jack: Right now, I'm building out a huge garden for us.

Claire: Which I love.

Jack: For you. You picked out a design that you liked, and I wanna make it just the way you want it, and this is me trying to keep love on you.

Ryan: Beautiful.

Claire: That act is beautiful and meaningful to me, but it just doesn't necessarily unlock some door to desire. I don't know what the answer is. Back when we were working on the sex thing, which I would say at this point we really don't work on, you'd say, "But I made you dinner." And to me, that was nice, but it doesn't necessarily increase desire.

Jack: I'm trying to find a way in, and I have been going down dead ends, I guess. Maybe you could tell me what, if those don't do it, what would?

Claire: I guess at this point I think that sex is sex. For me, it can't be undertaken with a lot of acrimony between us. Because I need to feel trust and just comfortable, unself-conscious.

Dating in your 20s was experimental just because you were with different partners. But being exploratory in a longer relationship, I've never done that.

Ryan: Jack, do you know what kind of day or week you would've had to have so that Claire would feel unself-conscious with you?

Jack: What kind of day or week would that be?

Claire: I'm not totally sure, but I feel like it's not being disciplined by you and ... I feel like our sex life is so off track at this point that what would be really amazing is if we could go back to being experimental. Because we don't know what works for us at this point, right? We need to be in a place where we can learn about each other again physically, especially after two kids. First of all, we're tired all the time. That can't be overestimated. But also thinking about sex and initiating sex is so loaded that it's really awkward and kind of off-putting.

Ryan: How would you know if that big beautiful message you just sent to Jack actually landed? You sort of gave him a formula, a recipe.

Jack: I heard that if we could find a way to have a peaceful week and maybe try to find some time away from the kids to be playful and experiment—

Claire: Yeah, I mean, that's true, but I don't even know how to sexually experiment, you know what I mean? Dating in your 20s was sexually experimental just because you were with different partners. But in terms of becoming more exploratory in a longer relationship, I've never done that. You saw — we can't even, like, put our hands on each other's cheeks. Also it requires a level of buy-in, not being meta or sarcastic, that's very hard for us.

Jack: We do have sex, just to be clear. We don't have much sex, but we do have sex.

Ryan: Great. How much sex are you having?

Claire: Once a month? Every six weeks?

Jack: We probably have sex three to five times a year.

Claire: Five. It's sad. It's not much sex.

Ryan: So you have sex three to five times a year. How is it? Is it awkward? Is it playful?

Claire: It's not playful. It's pleasant, and it can feel good, like it can be satisfying. It's not particularly aerobic or inventive. It's pretty straightforward, right?

Ryan: So suppose Jack said, "Oh, you get on top for a while."

Claire: Sometimes I feel very self-conscious about my body.

Ryan: Or "Let's do it standing up, in front of the mirror, or—"

Claire: That doesn't happen.

Ryan: But what if it did?

Claire: I'm the block to that, probably. I don't know how to get myself freed up.

Jack: Sometimes the sex is good, but more often I feel like Claire just kind of wants to wrap it up. And worse than not having sex is having sex with someone who doesn't want to have sex.

Claire: I'm sad to hear you say that. Sometimes that's the case, but usually I walk away feeling like, *Hmm, why don't we do that more often? That was nice.*

Jack: Sometimes, but it seems like it's more like after two to three months of me kind of, "Hey, hey, hey," you're like, "Okay."

Ryan: Okay. And what if she likes quickies?

Jack: That'd be great too.

Ryan: Maybe that's why she wants to wrap it up. "This was great. Let's do this all the time, if we can be assured of having a quickie, because I got kids to take care of."

Jack: Do you like quickies?

Claire: I probably like something approaching a quickie, but not a quickie ... I guess I feel like we just don't know each other in this way.

Ryan: I understand. So I am trying to disinhibit you guys a little. Jack, do you know how to loosen her up?

Jack: I mean, yeah.

Ryan: I see your big sigh.

Jack: When we're on, we have a really good rapport.

Claire: That's true. You know how to loosen me up outside of the bedroom. Everything inside of the bedroom has become so daunting. It feels like scaling the castle wall.

END

New York Magazine, April 1, 2019: Marriage: An Investigation