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Season 2, Episode 4: Green Flags in a Relationship

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MB: Hello everyone. Welcome to the Healthier You Podcast. I'm Megan Bergfeld, a clinical counselor in Vanderbilt's Employee Assistance Program. As a nod to Valentine's Day this month, we're going to talk about healthy relationships, what do they look like, and what role do we play in creating them? My friend and EAP colleague, Makenzie Parks, is here to talk it through with me today. Makenzie, thank you for joining me again.

MP: Thanks for having me, Megan.

MB: Makenzie and I recorded an episode this time last year on creating connections, so we'll link that episode in the show notes for anybody who's interested. Makenzie let's get started! We work with many clients having relationship troubles or looking for a partner, and many of them want to know, what does a healthy relationship look like?

MP: Sure. You know, in reality, no relationship is perfect. A lot of people want to talk about red flags, but if you're in a relationship or looking for one, red flags can be these big, scary things to avoid. Sometimes, I think it's easier to, instead of thinking about it from a lens of, "What do we want to avoid?", thinking about it from a lens of, "What are we looking for?" So, today we're going to be talking about, you could conceptualize it as green flags. And

we're actually, we'll link a worksheet in the show notes called "Relationship Green Flags," and that can kind of show a little bit more about this.

MB: Perfect.

MP: To start, I think the foundation of a healthy relationship is safety. So, this is the base of the relationship pyramid, if you will. We can't call a relationship healthy without safety and safety for all parties.

MB: How would you define safety in this context of relationships?

MP: Sure. This, of course, includes physical safety, but it also includes emotional safety, as well as intellectual safety. So, physical safety feels pretty easy to define, but we don't always consider emotional and mental safety, and these are categorized by feeling comfortable to share your feelings and thoughts. So, remember, relationships are two separate people coming together. It is unreasonable to expect that your partner will think and feel exactly like you do. All parties in a relationship should be able to express how they feel and what they think. So, one easy way to conceptualize this is by asking, "do I feel like I can be myself with this person?"

MB: Yeah. That's makes a lot of sense. We have to let our guard down, be able to let our guard down in a relationship with your partner without fear that that will somehow be held against us or there'll be some sort of consequence for being honest. So, in addition to like this mental, emotional, this physical safety, this big safety foundation, what else characterizes a healthy relationship?

MP: Everyone's values are different, so what's important in a partner will vary person to person, but I would say some general things that healthy relationships have in common are effective communication and balance. So, as I said before, a relationship involves at least two separate people coming together, and all relationships experience some level of conflict at one point or another. So, communicating effectively really helps in solving conflict, as well as allowing each partner to express their values and needs. Practicing honesty is, of course, an essential part of communicating well, and additionally, something we can always work on in relationships is striking that right balance between personal time and together time. That's what I mean when I say balance. It's important that all partners have things that they enjoy doing together, but it's also important that they have hobbies and friendships outside of their partner. Your partner can't be everything for you. This is a hard balance to strike, which is why it's so great if partners can communicate effectively about how they're feeling.

MB: Yeah, for sure. With communication, you know, it can be really challenging to share how you feel. I wonder if you could share some practical tips for doing this with your partner.

MP: Sure. You know, I learn from my clients all the time, and one of the tips that I learned from a client and have incorporated into my own relationship is this concept of scheduling a check in. So, scheduling some time that you and your partner will check in with each other about the state of your relationship. It's helpful to choose a time when there will be minimal distractions, so maybe this is best done after your kids go to bed or when you're out on a date, something like that. You can start by asking just a few questions, like "what do you feel like is going well in our relationship?," "how can I support you in this season of life?," and "are there any concerns you have about our relationship that you'd like to discuss?" And you can see, this doesn't have to be like a super formal format or anything, but it really opens the floor for discussion. Now, of course, it is best if both parties enter this kind of discussion open to feedback, right? These are some big open questions.

MB: Yep.

MP: And this can feel scary at first, but it really is such a nice way to, instead of assuming, knowing that you are on the same page as your partner.

MB: Yeah, I love that idea. I think having that scheduled thing kind of takes some of that fear or worry or uncertainty out of that sort of conversation.

MP: Yeah.

MB: Because you're right. I mean, it is scary to ask for feedback, because we're not always sure we're going to like what we hear.

MP: Sure.

MB: It's sort of uncomfortable. So, at the same time, though, that kind of talk can really be quite strengthening in a relationship. Do you have any tips for minimizing defensiveness in this kind of check in?

MP: Great question.

MB: I would be guilty of that, so.

MP: Great question. I think it's important that all parties know when a check in is happening so that no one perceives it as an attack. So, I think the first conversation is just bringing up the idea of a check in to your partner, right? So saying, hey, I always tell my clients you can blame this on me, so, "Hey, my counselor suggested we do this. What do you think about this?" and setting a date and a time. That way, everyone is in the right frame

of mind for this conversation. Everyone agrees to it. It's just a much better way to try to have this kind of conversation.

MB: Yeah, and have some time to prepare answers, too. Like, what do I want to bring up?

MP: So true. Yeah. That's so helpful. That's so helpful.

MB: Another, this is just another example of the importance of communication, right? Like we can get really defensive if we don't know that we're in a protected space, but the more we communicate about it, the safer we feel, and it just kind of all ties in together there.

MP: Exactly.

MB: So, I want to go back to your comment about balancing that together versus individual time. It seems like relationships can often lean one way or the other, and something I hear from clients, and honestly, I've experienced myself, is that they have this sense that they've lost themselves in the relationship.

MP: Yeah. I think this gets back to the idea that balance is a goal, and it can always be evaluated, in fact, should be reevaluated. So, this could even be something that you talk about in a check in with your partner. We're trying to balance being an individual and enjoying time together as a couple. You know, I gave an example of ways I've learned from my clients. I'm sure you have seen clients or loved ones practicing this kind of thing. So, I wonder if you could share any ways that you've seen it practiced well.

MB: Yeah, for sure. I think this really depends on the season of life you and your relationship are in.

MP: Sure.

MB: Like early on in a relationship, we're very focused on getting to know the person, spending time together, right? But as time goes on, it's natural for this to sort of even out. Ideally, we've kept in touch with ourselves and the things that make us us during that early phase. So, a simple example of how I see people practicing this is pursuing their own individual hobby or interest regularly, like making sure that they still attend that book club that they love or go to that gym class or get together with the lady friends, you know, just that special sort of protected time that's separate. We should all have the freedom in our relationships to do that. The amount of personal time that we need is going to ebb and flow over time, right? So, for instance, if you're parenting young kids, you may need more alone time because you're already maxed out on the stimulation that day.

MP: Right.

MB: If you're working from home or more socially isolated, it might make more sense to prioritize more of that together time, right? So, this is, you know, like having a shared show maybe that you watch every week or a game that you like to play together, exploring a new restaurant or park or something like that. Again, we're talking about balance, and I think the key with this is intentionality, and that's why, another reason why effective communication about what you need in a given season is so important.

MP: Those are all great examples, and I think one final note about this topic is you can practice a lot of these skills in friendships. So, even if you're not in a relationship right now, but you really want to practice having healthy relationships, you can focus on bringing safety to your friendships by using good communication, allowing space for your friends to share their own thoughts and feelings, and considering the balance between spending time together with a friend and alone time. All of these things apply.

MB: Yes, that's a really good point. You don't have to be in a romantic relationship to be fostering healthy relationships in your life.

MP: Exactly. And, you know, I think there's one more important relationship we should talk about here, and that's your relationship with yourself. It's gonna be hard to have healthy relationships with other people if you don't have one with yourself. And that might feel really intimidating if you feel like your relationship with yourself needs work. I think one easy way to start is just by evaluating the way that you speak to yourself, your self-talk. I like to ask myself, whatever I'm saying to myself, would I say this to a friend that I care about? And if the answer is no, I try not to speak to myself that way, because I would never speak harshly to a friend, and it's a good reminder of a way to treat myself with respect and kindness in the way that I talk to myself.

MB: Yeah, I completely agree. I think that that self-relationship is a key piece that too frequently slips to the back burner. I've noticed personally and in my professional life with clients that the inner work tends to bloom outward. So, if you treat yourself with love and respect, that tends to extend to the people around you and to your relationships. You also start to prioritize that or hold that as a standard in relationships moving forward, and that can just contribute to overall health in a relationship.

MP: Definitely. I mean, if you think about it, all of your relationships have you in common. So, if you are fostering this love and respect for yourself and other people, then there's a great chance that you're fostering healthy relationships.

MB: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Thank you. I think that is an excellent place for us to pause today. Makenzie, I always appreciate you sharing your insights. And listeners, thank you for tuning in to Healthier You. Until next time, take care.

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