

[00:00:00.550] - Melissa Corkum

Is your parenting journey turning out differently than you imagined? It's never too late to begin your family's transformation journey.

[00:00:09.040] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Wise podcast, where you'll rediscover the confident and connected parent you long to be. I'm Lisa C. Qualls.

[00:00:17.980] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:26.740] - Lisa C. Qualls

Hello, friends. Welcome to episode 244 of the Adoption Wise podcast. We're so glad you're here. Today, Melissa and I are going to be talking about a topic that circles round and round, both in our personal lives and in our communities and all of the parents that we support. We're going to be talking about the impact of blocked care on your marriage. I hope that those of you listening are thinking, Oh, yeah, I could use some input about this. Because as we all know, whether or not you're experiencing blocked care, parenting children with significant needs and very vulnerable nervous systems and potentially challenging behaviors is just very, very hard on a marriage. We're going to be sharing a little bit about our own lives, but also we have a couple of listeners' questions that we're going to be sharing as well. We're really glad to be tackling this topic, even though in some ways it's a little tender and a little vulnerable, right?

[00:01:29.730] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, absolutely. I'll also just jump in and say, if you are not married and you're like, I'll skip this week's episode, my guess is there are still people in your life that you're in close relationship to who are observing you parent, who may have feelings or judgments about that. There are also maybe people in your life who love your kids, who you're struggling to find compassion for or find compassion for how they're loving or not loving your kids. While the questions that came in are specifically around marriage, I think a lot of what we're going to talk about is probably might be relevant even if you're not married.

[00:02:17.190] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, I completely agree. This is really about the really dear relationships that we have in our lives that are not related to our kids, but the people that we're really in close relationship with. Just for a frame of reference, Russ and I, believe it or not, are celebrating our 40th wedding anniversary in June, which I am a little stunned by because that means that we must be really old, but I don't feel old at all. I don't know. I did turn 60 in January, which is also a little shocking. We met as seniors in high school, and Russ really, truly became my secure base. I formed a deep attachment to him as a young person. We were engaged as undergrads. We got married as undergrads. We've had a long journey, and we had a lot of years of marriage before we adopted and before our lives became much more complex and challenging. Definitely, it's not difficult for me to see how the impact of adding new children to our family with so many needs, how it affected our marriage, and where we are now 17 years in. How about you, Melissa?

[00:03:38.180] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, Patrick and I also met as babies, not in high school, but I was a freshman in college, and he was a senior. There's about three and a half years difference between the two of us. We've been married 20 years, which doesn't seem... No, 21. It'll be 22 years this summer, which is not 40, but also feels really significant.

[00:04:00.310] - Lisa C. Qualls

It's pretty good, Melissa. It's pretty good. 20 years is a long time.

[00:04:03.950] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. We didn't have a lot of years not parenting. We dated for about a year and a half before we were married, and then we had our first kid 10 months later. We became parents in our early 20s. Pretty

much our entire married life has been defined by parenting. Half of that married life, we've been adoptive parents. I don't think we're one of those couples that would say, Oh, it just gets easier and easier as the years go on. You've said this, too, before, Lisa. I feel like we've really had to fight for what we have, and we're still actively pursuing being committed to stay married to each other. It's not like we love each other, and a lot of times we enjoy each other, and we're very different. We've both changed a since we were 20. And neither of us had any idea what we were going to become and who we were going to grow up to be.

[00:05:11.170] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah. Isn't that the truth? So we were married three years, a little less than three years when our first daughter was born. And then 20 years later, after we'd given birth to a total of seven kids, 20 years later, we adopted. So we had that long period of time of parenting children who were born to us, which I'm not saying was totally, totally easy. It was a lot of work. Then we have the experience of adding four kids to our family. So, yeah, lots of years of being parents. And we realized that next year, our youngest will graduate from high school, and we will have been parenting kids in our home for 38 years when he graduates from high school. We're dreaming about what the future could look like.

[00:06:01.450] - Melissa Corkum

Here's our first listener question.

[00:06:04.320] - Listener Question

Can you please tell me how I can possibly explain to my husband about blocked care? He has gotten to a point where he wants to divorce me because he can't believe how I treated our daughter for about 10 years. I just found out about blocked care a week ago, and I could not possibly identify with this more, I just never knew what to do. And I just felt like I could never love my daughter or show her any type of love or compassion for such a long time. And then I became depressed and isolated and ashamed. I just don't know how to explain it to my husband because he doesn't want to be with me anymore. He won't go to therapy with me, and I just don't know what to do because is not believing this concept of blocked care. Thank you.

[00:07:04.730] - Lisa C. Qualls

Melissa, I know you and I both have a lot of things we could say to respond to this question, which for our listener, thank you for trusting us. This is a really vulnerable and tender question, and I'm sure there's a lot of sadness and fear involved in a situation like this. I do want to make note of one thing in the question that we're going to just reflect on later in our discussion. But at the beginning, she says, How do I explain blocked care to my husband? So as I was listening to the question, I was thinking, Oh, he doesn't know anything about block care. How do I present this to him? But at the very end, she says, He doesn't believe in it. So it sounds like he's been exposed to some information about blocked care, possibly from her, but that he cannot see that as a reason to explain her interactions and behavior toward their daughter. I want to come back to that, but I just wanted to make note of it.

[00:08:03.370] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I think it's so hard to talk about Blocked Care in some ways. It's one thing when we are invited into a situation, or we're teaching a breakout and people come to us looking for information, but to use it to defend behavior. I get it, right? You're like, Oh, my gosh, This is why I had such a hard time in this dynamic with our daughter or our son. This explains it. But if our spouse has maybe not had those feelings of blocked care, it's hard to get your mind around. We know that blocked care comes from excessive stress and that parenting is stressful. Parenting kids with high needs is stressful. Having people with complex developmental trauma in your family is stressful, and stress tends to put us in a more protective than connective mode. If everyone's walking around in protection mode, a parent is in blocked care, a child is in blocked trust, and now there's also a spouse in this protective mode. We're not our most receptive to new information. Our confirmation bias is not one that gives the benefit of the doubt to people. So It may be hard for someone who's not in blocked care to receive that and then all of a sudden have compassion for the behavior they've been watching play out.

[00:09:43.890] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned confirmation bias. Can you circle back and just explain a little bit

more about what you mean for our listeners who aren't familiar? If you can even come up with a little example on the spot, an example would help, too.

[00:09:58.240] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, confirmation bias is just our nervous system is taking in so much information, If the data that I'm interpreting doesn't have a clear meaning, then I'll just use my confirmation bias, my assumption of the way things normally go to assign that. In this case, we talk about a confirmation bias of I'm either safe in the world and I'm connected in the world, or I need to protect myself and I'm not safe in the world. I'll use this example. My husband's currently traveling, and so we're apart. I texted him this morning, Hey, miss you. I didn't hear anything back for hours and hours and hours. If I had a confirmation bias that our marriage is good, then the story I tell myself is he's got a busy work day, maybe his texts aren't working. The story I tell myself is in line with my assumptions about our relationship. Confirmation bias is like an assumption, right? If my assumption is that our marriage is struggling, then the story becomes, Oh, maybe he doesn't miss me back. Maybe we're in a fight. The story becomes really different. Same data, different story.

[00:11:09.980] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, that is so helpful. Thank you for circling back to that. I was thinking about the fact that, so based on the tiny bit we know about this circumstance, this couple has an adopted daughter, daughter who was adopted, and the mother, her nervous system became very overwhelmed. She was under excessive stress. Her nervous system began to protect her so that she began to feel in a, well, we keep saying protective stance. You know what we're talking about, where something does not feel quite right. And so you become very aware and protective of yourself instead of that easy flow that we feel when we have this deep sense of safety. So the mother in this situation developed blocked care, and she and her daughter then are in this cycle where her daughter has blocked trust. I'm guessing that's the circumstance here. It could be something different. But let's say the daughter is in blocked trust. She fundamentally, deep within herself, does not feel deeply safe and trusting in her relationship with her mom. I'm talking on a subconscious nervous system level. I'm not talking about, do I feel safe? Is my mom going to hurt me?

[00:12:27.180] - Lisa C. Qualls

That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about on a very deep level. Then the mom's blocked trust continues to grow, and it just goes round and round and round. Here's dad, who also has a relationship both with mom and daughter. I'm picturing this all in my mind like a graphic. And dad has this relationship with the daughter. He does not have blocked care. He feels fine. I don't know if normal is the right word, but the daughter and the dad have this flow that feels very natural. I'm sure wasn't always perfect or anything like that. But here's the dad, and what he's observing is the mother's behavior toward the daughter. He actually has no idea that this is a deeply subconscious thing happening within her nervous system. He also has no idea what her actual motivations are because all he can see is her actions, and her actions just seem wrong and unkind or dismissive or whatever. The dad is looking at this from a totally outside perspective.

[00:13:36.260] - Melissa Corkum

Just keeping in mind all of those dynamics, I imagine in our relationship, what would keep us all connected whilst sharing new information would be, one, remembering what we can control versus what we can influence. I think trying as best as we can to go in with expectations of what's mine to do is present this information in the best way that I know how in the most connected way, but then also understand and do enough work. Probably a lot of visits with my therapist, for whatever happened after that. I think the four mantras that Suzanne Stabile talks about are show up, pay attention, tell the truth, and don't get attached to the results.

[00:14:29.650] - Lisa C. Qualls

Much easier said than done.

[00:14:31.410] - Melissa Corkum

So much easier said than done.

[00:14:33.080] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, I'm listening to you and you get to the last one, Don't be attached to the results. I'm like, Darn, that's the hard one for me.

[00:14:40.100] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, right. But I think in this situation, show up means be present to yourself. Pay attention has a lot to do with attunement, the other people around you. Then tell the truth in kindness, in as plain English as we can, and then don't get attached to the result. Show up with your nervous system as regulated as you can. You don't want to just blurt this out in the middle of a disagreement as like, But you don't understand. I'm just in blocked care, kind of thing.

[00:15:17.940] - Lisa C. Qualls

It's not my fault.

[00:15:20.980] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, and it's not my fault. Stop blaming me. Pay attention to how the dynamic is impacting our spouse and our kids, and potentially how they prefer to be communicated with. So circumstantially, is it over food? Is it a certain time of day? I think it's always disarming to take responsibility of, I know that I have not been the mom that I want to be in the last X number of years or so many months. Maybe we haven't really talked about it seriously, but I feel a lot of shame. I don't like it either, and I haven't known how to fix it. But recently, I was reading this book or I heard this thing, and this is where we just tell the truth. I heard this term called blocked care, and I know it doesn't excuse all the things, but it's starting to help me better understand why that was so hard for me. Then we can't get attached to the results. I know that's the bummer in this whole thing.

[00:16:30.640] - Lisa C. Qualls

I think, too, in a conversation like that, we have to remember that we can't, like you were saying, don't be attached to the results. We can't expect a certain response. Some of this might have to sink in. And so after you shared what you've learned and your own feelings, you may have a lot of sadness over the lost years because you didn't know. All you knew was that it felt really bad and you didn't know what to do about it. If you can express that sadness, and also express some hope that maybe now that you know all this, whether your daughter still lives in your home or not, it is never too late to at least try to repair a relationship. It might take your husband a little bit of time to process all of this. The problem, of course, is that when we have these unhealthy dynamics, things begin to build up. You're talking about a decade of things building up here. The other thing that we haven't talked about yet, and maybe this is circling back to the beginning of he doesn't really want to believe that blocked care is real. One of the things Melissa and I have been really digging into is how broadly can blocked care be used as an explanation for relational disconnect and protection?

[00:17:59.470] - Lisa C. Qualls

We've had people ask us, I'm a teacher. Can I have blocked care toward my student? But one of the other really significant questions we get semi-regularly is, Can I have blocked care toward my spouse, toward my partner? And so that actually leads us to our next listeners' question.

[00:18:20.190] - Lisa C. Qualls

Is your adoption journey turning out differently than you imagined? You had so much love to give, but now you feel ashamed and bewildered by your lack of compassion. You may be experiencing blocked care, a self-protective mechanism in your nervous system that makes it difficult to connect with your child and maintain compassion. When this happens, it's like your heart seems to have left the relationship. But the good news is you are not a bad parent. You can heal from blocked care and compassion can be rekindled in your heart.

[00:18:51.840] - Melissa Corkum

This episode is sponsored by our book, *Reclaim Compassion, the Adoptive Parents Guide to Overcoming Blocked Care with Neuroscience and Faith*. This practical and powerful guide offers a simple step-by-step process for reclaiming compassion for your child and yourself. Included in the book is a blocked care assessment, which is now free to you, our listeners. You can take the

assessment at reclaimcompassion.com/assessment.

[00:19:22.520] - Listener Question

What advice do you have for people who are feeling all the symptoms described of blocked care? But towards their husband, not necessarily the kids? I believe family and marriage is one of the core things to having a healthy and healed family and willing to put in the time. But it's been a difficult feeling the last in the last few years. Thanks.

[00:19:47.880] - Lisa C. Qualls

So this question about, Can we have blocked care toward our spouse? has been something that Melissa and I have wrestled with because when we first learned about blocked care, the definition, as we understood it was that it was in a relationship between a caregiver and a child. We had that perspective. But as we got this question more and more, we thought, Okay, we're not sure, and we want to be absolutely sure that we are answering this appropriately. So we actually went to the source. The person who coined the term "blocked care" was Dr. Jon Baylin. We went to him and we said, Okay, your work has been so important to us in our work with supporting parents, but we want to dig in with you, and could you talk with us more? So we met with him several times together with some other people, and one of the results of our conversations with Dr. Baylin was to come up with a term that is the same feeling of blocked care, that same defensive posture, that same protective mechanism in the nervous system, but it's between peers. Like adult to adult, parent or spouse to spouse, things like that. The term that we've come to, the term we came up with is something called blocked compassion. In listening to this, both of these listeners' questions, what I'm hearing a lot is blocked compassion.

[00:21:20.920] - Melissa Corkum

In the practical sense, the names of the categories are less important than the feelings because the feelings are similar. Actually, the answer, the how do you overcome it, is super similar. But it just helps, I think there's going to be certain situations where it's helpful to differentiate the different types of relationships that happen. The short answer is very simple and very hard, and it's good nervous system care. How do we overcome feelings of blocked compassion towards a spouse? The same simple practices that we talk about for reclaiming compassion for ourselves and then our kids, if we're in blocked care, still apply. We'll talk a little bit more about... We're not going to just leave you hanging with that. But I think that's the important thing to remember is whenever we're struggling in relationship, no matter which direction it is with another person, we'll always do better if we're taking really good care of our nervous system so that we can stay regulated. At least one of us in whatever relationship it is, is maintaining that rootedness in a sense of felt safety.

[00:22:51.160] - Lisa C. Qualls

Right, because when we can be anchored in our own felt safety and anchored in this deeper sense of being okay on the inside. We have more capacity to remain in a connection mode toward this person that in this case of a spouse, this person we love and we want to be in connection with. But maybe our spouse or our partner has some blocked compassion toward us because of this past history in the stories we're hearing. We have to be able to do our own work and get ourselves into a place of deep regulation so that then when we engage with our partner, we do not quickly get activated and thrown right back into protection mode over and over again. Because one of us has to make the first steps. Then hopefully, little by little, that experience of being in connection with each other rather than protection, it reminds us that it feels good. I don't know. Maybe I'm going off on a tangent here, but I just know that when two people, when our nervous systems are in connection mode, when we are both in this regulated sense of felt safety, it feels really good. It feels like you can just take a deep breath together. But when we're in protection mode, nothing feels good. We feel uneasy in each other's presence.

[00:24:22.490] - Melissa Corkum

Or like we're not on the same team.

[00:24:25.590] - Lisa C. Qualls

Well, that- Yes, very much.

[00:24:25.590] - Melissa Corkum

We're against each other instead of together. I think the other thing is I'm noticing that the more I can stay grounded in that connection mode and that sense of felt safety, that keeps us connected to our upstairs brain. That's the brain that can put ourselves in someone else's shoes, who can have perspective, who can have enough openness to think of all the possibilities of what's going on for the other person. So rather than just feeling hurt and immediately defensive that our spouse is acting a certain way, we can stay curious. Like, curiosity about our kid's behavior or our spouse's behavior or the neighbor's behavior, or grandma's behavior. All of that requires our own sense of felt safety. Without that curiosity, we can't access that radical compassion, that I don't like the way they're behaving, but I can understand why they might be experiencing life this way. Being able to present ourselves with that curiosity and openness sometimes can begin to break down that cycle of protection and defensiveness.

[00:25:58.930] - Lisa C. Qualls

I think when we can remain in our upstairs thinking brain, because we are so regulated and anchored, it gives us the ability to persevere. If your desire is to bring your marriage back from the brink, and you can understand, like Melissa, what you're saying about being curious. If you can care for yourself and your nervous system in a way that then it gives you capacity to have some compassion for your spouse or whoever the other person is, then you can stay the course. Because when it doesn't go well, instead of just flipping right into protection mode again, which we will do sometimes, but if you can stay in connection mode and be like, Okay, All right, I can try again. I can try again another time. I'm not going to fall all the way back into my own confirmation bias and protection mode. I'm going to stay as open-hearted as I can. That's not easy. I definitely am not saying it's easy. But I think if you want to save your marriage, it's really worth it to give it your best shot.

[00:27:11.160] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, for sure. For us, it's looked like being able to answer the question, What do I need? Do I need sleep? Do I need a mental break? Do I need to feel connection in person to somebody who feels safe? Maybe it's not a spouse right now. Maybe it's not one of your kids. The other thing, I say this is probably one of our marriage superpowers, and we all know superpowers can also be kryptonites. But we, even when things are really, really hard, we are able to find small moments of connection. We've never been in such trouble that every little thing is hard. Even when it's hard, we can laugh at a funny meme together, or there's some inside joke from years ago that comes up, or there's still something that we can choose to say yes to, even if it feels hard, like hiking. Anything in nature is really, really good. I know that works really well for you and Russ. Just clinging to anything that's positive. We say this with our kids sometimes, building little bits of connection, getting in and getting out before it goes south. So maybe it's not a long dinner date. Maybe it's something really quick. Maybe it's just re-instituting a kiss and an I love you before you start your days.

[00:29:00.040] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah. Maybe there might just be a few things that really resonate with you. For us, it's the idea of turning toward each other and not away. That's hard to do. If you're in protection mode and you're both just very... You do not have that sense of felt safety together. It's really everything that happens, we tend to turn away. But when we can make the effort to turn toward, that makes a very big difference. The other thing I would recommend any, any couple who needs either a tune up on their marriage or you're all the way to like, We're almost ready to be divorced. I highly recommend a therapy called Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy. If you do some googling, it's Dr. Sue Johnson is the one who developed this, and she has a couple of books which we'll put in the show notes. One is called *Hold Me Tight*, and the other one is called, remind me. *Love Sense*. What it really is, is couples therapy based on attachment science. Our marriages are attachment relationships. And so what we want to do is build secure attachment in our marriage. And from my own experience of having done traditional couples therapy with Russ and then emotionally focused therapy, there's a profound difference. Because in traditional couples therapy, there's a lot of emphasis on communication skills and a lot of things that involve our higher levels of thinking. But attachment-based therapy, emotionally focused therapy, is all about feeling profoundly safe in each other's presence, feeling like me experiencing Russ as my secure base and my safe haven, and him experiencing me that way.

Because once we can get that going once we can reestablish that secure attachment or begin to build it if we've never had it, then we can actually use our higher thinking brains to think about communication and all those kinds of things. But I think until you have that foundation, all other therapies are going to be less effective. Now, if you're a couple who's just in a bumpy road and you have secure attachment with each other, then all those regular therapeutic techniques might work great. But if things have really broken down and you're struggling to feel connected and secure with each other, I would definitely start with emotionally focused therapy.

[00:31:39.910] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I love that. I was even thinking just when you're talking about attachment relationships, just like we have with our kids, one of our most favorite quick win things with our kids is Lessons in Liking, where you text with a friend or a spouse every day one thing you like about maybe that hardest kid, and it helps change your view on... It changes your confirmation bias. It changes your assumptions about that child. I was just thinking, that would be an easy one to convert to couples, like lessons in liking for each other. Just pick a time of day where you're each going to text something that you appreciate or like about the other person. Maybe it's a past tense. Maybe it's hard to call for something right now. Maybe it's like, I fell in love with you back then because of this. We can just going to remind ourselves, we're going to be looking for those things. Because if the story we're telling ourselves is that our marriage is hard, our brain is going to start looking for evidence to complete that confirmation bias. Every little - No relationship is perfect. Every little bump in the road, you're going to be like, See, I knew our marriage was in trouble. But if you could have the same exact marriage and just tell yourself that we're committed to it. This is hard, but we both like each other and we're both committed, and we're in this for the long haul. Then what your brain is looking for, your brain's looking for, We're committed. We like each other. It's looking for different things, and all of the data might be there. It's just what we're focusing on.

[00:33:15.290] - Lisa C. Qualls

Absolutely. I actually did that many years ago, and now I wish I could go back. I'm going to have to find it. But I created a journal for Russ, and every day I wrote something that I loved about him, appreciated about him. I did my own one-sided lessons in liking, but I did it because I needed to change my mindset. And then I gave it to him as a gift. I know that it's something really dear to him. I'd be very curious to read through it now, now that we're in a better space. And see what I wrote. I might have... This is the beauty of writing. You can go back and remember yourself. I would recommend these things. I guess, if anything, what I want to do as we wrap up is just encourage everyone listening that marriages can go through seasons that are hard. And marriages involving the kind parenting we're doing, it can be a long, long stretch of hard. Persevere. Do not give up. As far as as possible with you. Now, we cannot actually save a marriage all by ourselves. We can't. There has to be willingness on both sides, but we can start some steps in that direction. So both our listeners who called in, thank you. Thank you for bringing those questions. They were very vulnerable questions. I hope that we've shared some information that might be encouraging and helpful. I guarantee you that in our 40 years, Russ and I have walked through some hard times, and we are seeing a lot of hope right now, and I'm just, I mean, I'm so thankful. I'm just very, very thankful that we're in this place that we are right now.

[00:34:54.370] - Melissa Corkum

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our Instagram handle is @adoptionwise. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community @adoptionwise.org/facebook.

[00:35:08.190] - Lisa C. Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. Remember, you're a good parent doing good work.

[00:35:17.850] - Melissa Corkum

Music for the podcast is composed by Oleksandr Oleksandrov.