

# In The Trenches\_ Conversation with Dr. Jennifer Musselman

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## SPEAKERS

Steve Divitkos, Dr. Jennifer Musselman

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**D** Dr. Jennifer Musselman 00:00  
Steve. Jennifer, welcome to the show. Hi. Thanks, Steve.

**S** Steve Divitkos 00:04  
So maybe to set the context for those listening, I'd love for us to just have you walk us through the arc of your career and tell us a bit more about what you're currently doing as a marriage and family therapist and executive coach with a focus primarily on executives and entrepreneurs. I'd love to just learn a little bit more about that before we dive into some specifics.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 00:28

So I worked in corporate America for Viacom, specifically Nickelodeon television, under the MTV Networks banner, for 13 years, and my family's from a small town blue collar family in the Midwest, and so I didn't have any kind of mentors on how to navigate corporate America. And in that time, the culture had become very toxic when the CEOs changed, and it became a very much a dynamic of power struggles, silos, resource guarding, roles and responsibilities. Keep in mind, it was at the time when social media was just entering the landscape, and nobody knew what to do with it and who was responsible for it, etcetera, etcetera. So it just became toxic. And admittedly, I was much, much younger, more immature and uncertain, of like I could see the power dynamic shifting, and it really, you know, from my childhood and being in my own personal therapy, I understood that, you know, things are dangerous, right? But I didn't know how to tell people to fix it. And I was an executive, but not high enough to, like force the change, if you will. And so I threw myself back into grad school during this very toxic CEO shift changeover. And culture, I should say the toxic culture. And my own therapist was like, get a trade, become a clinical psychotherapist, not just organizational. So I did that and got my license as a marriage and family therapist. And that takes a lot of time and a lot of schooling while I was still gainfully employed full time for Nickelodeon, until the last year when I was pretty clear at the company, and we sort of made a very polite exit. They gave me a severance, and I continued on with finishing my grad school. And then I kind of ran and sort of like a, you could call it, almost like a startup for a nonprofit who were trying to get into getting paid through insurance for drug and alcohol treatment. So it kind of just became responsible for launching that division for the nonprofit, which was very, very different for them. They originally were for homeless people and people recently released from prison. So I got the sort of whole hands on experience of like, okay, building a program, finding funding, you know, all the things of that come along with it, hiring staff, all that stuff, growing the business and scaling it. And then an angel investor friend of mine mentioned to me he was having interpersonal problems and with one of his portfolio companies, and for a tech company, I'm going to try to be discreet about that. And so I went into that company and applied my marriage and family therapy skills to the system that was happening. And it became evidently clear to me that the tools that you can learn as a therapist in working from a systems perspective can be applied to an organization which is just a larger system. And also in my own experience and working in corporate and having been in my own therapy, and then understanding it from a therapist lens, I also understood intimately that what plays out in our personal lives, meaning both what's happening in our personal lives, spills over to our work performance. And vice versa. But secondarily, our family of origin issues can also play out in work, you know, attachment challenges and how we engage or interact with our colleagues or a stressed toxic culture. And how we relate to it, how we interact with it, how we engage with it, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. And so while I was navigating the change management for this portfolio company and having all these realizations that you don't really get schooled on when you're in school for therapy, that's when I kind of connected all the dots. That was probably about, maybe 14 years ago or 12 years ago. And so then I threw myself back into graduate school to get my doctorate in organizational leadership through the psychology and education division at USC, and really just enhanced the languaging and the change management and the performance and motivation psychology skill set that you don't quite get in just regular therapy school.

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Steve Divitkos 05:37

Yeah, as you know, as we discussed before we hit record today, I was just kind of telling you that at least in my experience, it's quite rare to have somebody who specializes in marriage and family, in issues of marriage and family, but also with a very specific focus on executives and entrepreneurs. And it is, in fact, kind of the overlap of those two things that I want to focus our discussion on today. And this is a follow up of sorts to a blog post that I wrote two to three years ago called The entrepreneur and The Spousal Relationship. And I thought that this was something that was worth talking about, because, you know, this will surprise very few folks, but this is certainly not something that they discuss in business schools. So we have no formal training for this, and yet, these were the types of things that kept me up when I tried to put my head on the pillow at night. And so I viewed this as an under discussed topic within the entrepreneurial community, and where I would like to start our discussion is on maybe what I'll call typical challenges. So I suspect I'm safe in saying that, that, you know, there are challenges and realities that are common to substantially all couples and all spousal relationships, right, like nuts and bolts, things like, you know, communication, intimacy, things like that. But I guess what I'm curious to know is, in your experience, what are some challenges that appear to be particularly unique to the spousal relationship in which one of those spouses is an entrepreneur or CEO? What unique challenges does that tend to present?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 07:13

Steve, quickly, before I answer that question, I want to touch on something you said about how it's not talked about enough about being an entrepreneur or a CEO role and the challenges you face with a partner. It is by far the most important decision we will make in our entire lives. Who we partner with, if we choose to partner with them. Research shows men fare better when they're in an exclusive, specifically marital relationship, but it is by far one of the most important decisions that we will make. Because it impacts how our career develops and unfolds, and also obviously becomes prominent in being able to raise a family, if that's what someone chooses, or at least run a household, while building a business. And it's deeply underrated, because I see the impact that a spouse's support or lack thereof can have on a founder or a CEO and the impact that it has on their work performance. And so I've long said we can't bifurcate our lives, having lived that myself, and I think far too many people will, you know, believe that they can, and I can promise you that that's a short term strategy, and long term, the dam will break, and if you don't pick the right partner, it will impact all parts of your life. So I just wanted to punctuate that. The unique challenges that we the spouses of entrepreneurs and or CEOs, and sometimes they're a little different, right? If you have an established company, it's very different than if you're trying to just build one from scratch. But the biggest challenges I saw were like number one, the actual spouse of the entrepreneur or of the CEO rarely have their own people to confide in, so much like this, the founder or a CEO. You know, it's kind of lonely at the top, because they can't really share some things with the board of directors. Can't share some things with their executive team. They can't share some things with, you know, other employees. The spouses also have to be very almost protective with what they're sharing. Because these are people who are either currently in or probably going to become high profile individuals, and a lot of people need to protect the sort of the reputation of their partner in that way. But also the the the knowingness, if you will, of really understanding what it feels like to go through an entrepreneurial venture is a very isolating experience, and not everyone is willing to do that. So having spouses of entrepreneurs or CEOs who understand what that life is like, and almost like having a spousal group. So if I know YPO kind of does that a lot for the spouses, is really important, because they need a place to confide in. But even in those YPO circles, a lot of my clients can't share with the other spouses when they're struggling with their partnership, because that becomes an image issue. So I think, honestly, that is one of the biggest challenges that I find the spouses of the entrepreneurs face or CEOs face? Frankly, you know, also, a lot of my research showed that a lot of entrepreneurial, venture founders are also kind of prone to ADHD, not all, but many. And this is a little bit of like that higher novelty seeking personality. And so to be the spouse of a partner who suffers from something like ADHD, that in of itself, requires a special skill set and patience and just understanding. And so, you know, I don't think people understand the impact of not only someone you know, dealing with a partner who has ADHD, but coming home with this, just this roller coaster of emotions. But I frequently see a lot of founders don't quite have a harness on, and the spouses are, you know, subject to dealing with that and trying to figure out how to deal with that with their partner, and that in of itself, can be a little lonely as the spouse.

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Steve Divitkos 12:09

What's particularly interesting is that, you know, basically since since day one of making my content public, I've had this line that I tend to scream from the mountaintops, which is, which is this idea of, nobody knows What it's like to be an entrepreneur or CEO unless you have been one period. But what I'm what I'm hearing from you, is nobody knows what it's like to be the spouse of an entrepreneur or CEO unless you have been one period. Is that accurate?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 12:34

Yeah, I'd say that's pretty accurate. Yes.

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Steve Divitkos 12:38

So please go ahead. I apologize for interrupting you.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 12:40

That's okay. No, please. Please do. It's a conversation. So I did mention emotion regulation. You know that that spouse is subject to, you know, some spouses feel this need to regulate their partner's emotions, what I call the big feels, particularly when they're going through some of the most challenging pieces of building a venture, like layoffs, fundraising, things of that nature. And I would argue that a lot of spouses need to better learn how to what we would call a holding environment, create a holding environment for their partners to have these big emotions but not take them on and so they, even themselves, need to find ways to work. I would encourage working with a therapist to how to navigate what it's like to, you know, come, you know, be the almost responsible party, if you will, even though they shouldn't be fully responsible, to help navigate these big fields from the founder or the CEO? Yeah, I think those are the biggest unique challenges of being a spouse to someone who's a founder or CEO.

**S****Steve Divitkos 13:53**

Okay, I have about a million follow up questions for you. Okay, for the time being, let's take the perspective of the entrepreneur in the relationship, and then we'll move to the spouse of the entrepreneur. So the following question is based on my own personal experience. So I found that, you know, as an entrepreneur, when I came home at the end of the day, I did so in a pretty exhausted and emotionally depleted state. And because of this, I often felt too exasperated to talk to my wife about the day's problems, because, honestly, I preferred not to relive them. Or I had very little energy for anything other than attempts at rest, or I was just so absorbed in my own work that I didn't even ask my wife about hers. And the unfortunate reality of this, and this is only clear in hindsight, of course, is that the person who was most important to me, being my spouse, regularly got the worst of me right. And so it all seems very understandable, I suppose, but ultimately undesirable. So I don't know. Is there some way that, as entrepreneurs, like we avoid this trap of the person who's most important to us regularly getting the worst of us?

**D****Dr. Jennifer Musselman 15:05**

Yeah, there are certainly some techniques. And I think if I were to add to the initial the first question, that is another sort of challenge that the spouses deal with. It's like they lack their own emotional support, which is why I did mention that'd be helpful for them to have a sort of a group of people they could talk to. But yeah, there are some, some special techniques that I would encourage. What you described of your experience is a common, common, common experience. I do see it fall into two sort of ends of the spectrum. One is to your point, like, I want to leave the day. I want to leave my work at work. I don't want my home to be filled with peace and fun when they come home, and that's what they're needing and wanting. They want to forget about the stressors from work, or they are so out of whack, if you will, with their emotions they almost become enmeshed and dependent upon their spouse to kind of help them process their emotions. So it's almost like a passing on the fields. And, you know, neither one is a good approach. And what you talked about is what I would call, like, yes, the spouse gets what's called the leftovers, almost, if that, yeah, it is no fun for anybody. So what I've seen work really well is, number one, what is really important for entrepreneurs. And yeah, you know, may sound a little antiquated, but the research proves, like just like you would in an organization, having each partner know and understand what each of their roles and responsibilities are where you've negotiated it, not expected it. That make sense? Where it's been agreed upon what these roles and responsibilities are in the everyday life really important and helpful in making the household run smoothly. As it pertains to like the actual sort of motion that you're feeling and the challenges that you may or may not want to talk about when you get home. There needs to be an agreed upon, a discussed and agreed upon transition period, right? So a lot of my clients will try to take phone calls on their drive back home from being at the office all day, and so they're not winding down during that time. They're still like trying to maximize their their time. And I get that sometimes that's necessary, but that transition time is essential from removing your CEO hat and or stressors so that you can center and show up as the husband or the wife to the partner at home. Does that make sense? And so when that doesn't happen, it makes it more difficult to have the capacity to show up for your partner at home. And I don't think people recognize the importance of capacity in when I say capacity, it can look like a lot of things, but especially emotional capacity and psychological capacity. So if that time frame has not been utilized to get grounded, get centered. I mean, I would even argue to go to do something before you get home, like 30 minute meditation or

yoga class before you get back to the house, a walk on the beach, whatever your Zen is, we need to get to that before you enter the house. Or there needs to be a negotiated time frame. I've had some clients negotiate with their partner, I need 30 minutes when I get home to just zone out, to just release the stress from the day. And then in those 30 minutes, I will come back to the relationship, making that the priority and to show up for for the family, for you, and potentially share a little bit, maybe high level, what my day was like. What I noticed happen is that a lot of people, and I don't want to make this just a gender thing, but I do see this to be more often with male founders or CEOs, is that they just don't want to, like bring it home with them. It's almost like that compartmentalization, and then what happens to the part that the partner at home is they feel left out. They feel isolated, they want to be brought into their partner's day, you know, they want to participate. And so that's where the conflict is, and how we identify what we share as the CEO or founder, I think, is really important learning like, okay, maybe I don't have to go into the detail so much because, you know, I don't want to relive it. But maybe if I give my partner a high level, hey, I'm just dealing with some layoffs and some runway issues, and I'm just really stressed this week, and I don't want to answer a lot of questions, but I just want to give you some insight into, like, if I have reduced capacity this week, this is why. And here's what I really need from you, is just some understanding this week, right? If there are these conversations around what what we have to give and what we want to share, then it doesn't make the other partner feel so left out. It's not personal. They don't personalize it. If you also then have a technique where you have reserved one day a week or an hour where you do connect more deeply. Where you do touch base and say, So, how are you really? Then there's the partner who is not the entrepreneur CEO knows there is space for this conversation. They can lean into that conversation and trust that like I may not get my desire to connect more deeply in the moment when my partner comes home, but I know I can later this week, because we've got a pre arranged agreement on every Sunday at two o'clock in the afternoon, the kids are away, phones are away. We go for a walk on the beach or down the block, and we just put everything away. And it's just about us connecting, about the good, the bad, the ugly. Not about logistics, not about logistics. It's about how are you? Each of you, how are we as a couple? And that's probably the most important meeting you will have throughout your entire week. Unfortunately, a lot of people kick it down the road and don't make it as important as it needs to be.

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Steve Divitkos 21:54

You know, I once had a like, CEO coach type of person tell me, and it took me years for this to kind of soak into my DNA. But he said something to the effect of the root of all interpersonal conflict is the difference between agreements and expectations. And that's kind of what I'm getting from you. And the two words that are kind of floating to mind as I'm listening to what you just said are the importance of being like, deliberate or explicit. So, for example, being deliberate about, like, what we need or want when we're venting to our partners, being deliberate or explicit about, like, what we're expected to do in our roles as spouses and parents, and when we're supposed to do it. Being explicit about, maybe when to talk about business versus when not to like, am I oversimplifying and suggesting that most people just aren't deliberate and explicit about these things, and so they just kind of let them accidentally unfold?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 22:53

I think you're 100% on to what I'm saying, but I think I'm going to take it one step further and deeper, we aren't deliberate and explicit because we aren't self aware. And being self aware is by far the most important technique to developing the best relationships of all types, and particularly with the relationship with your partner, but the most important relationship you will ever have is the one you have with yourself. And so if you aren't aware of what your triggers are, what your needs are, how to communicate those in a way that is effective, but what we would call sort of a soft serve, to get your needs met, then you're only going to be met with resistance, frustration, resentment, expectations that are just completely missing each other.

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Steve Divitkos 23:48

I think that makes a lot of sense. I want to quickly touch on this question of compartmentalization, because you've mentioned a few times now, I found this kind of question, or this elusive art of compartmentalization, very difficult. And I found that, again, this was only true with hindsight. It wasn't at all clear to me when I was actually in the weeds, but I found that periods of anxiety or worry or self doubt at work almost accidentally manifested in me feeling stagnant or even disengaged in my relationship, whereas periods of success or growth or optimism often manifested in me feeling very engaged in my relationship. And in retrospect, I just wish that that wasn't the case. And so I guess the question to you is hundreds of 1000s of people are regularly asking the questions, how do I compartmentalize or separate my home self from my work self? I guess the question to you is like, is that even possible? Is that a goal that we should bother to pursue?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 24:54

So it actually came up in my doctoral dissertation quite a bit in doing the primary research I did with a lot of entrepreneurs and CEOs that they believe and lean heavily into compartmentalization. And I think for a short term strategy, like, if I need to run a board meeting, that works, but it's not a long term strategy. What I saw, and was repeatedly stated in not so many words, is the dam will break, and it does. And often the dam breaks in divorce, and then the impact of divorce to an entrepreneur or CEO's work performance is catastrophic. And in fact, there's a lot of research to demonstrate that work performance and results are very poor during a CEO or an entrepreneur's divorce. So a lot of people use compartmentalization, basically to kick the can down the road. And as I said, as a short term solution for that day or that week, it makes sense, and it can be effective, but like being on the front lines of war, that's where you need to really maximize on compartmentalization, but in our everyday work world, where we are in a first world country, it's not going to work long term, and it actually only makes matters worse. What I found people do is they over index on being successful at work, and because it can be when things are not going well at home, and that over indexing only makes things worse at home. And so that's when the dam breaks, because now they can't contain it anymore. Does that make sense?

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Steve Divitkos 26:44

It does. I guess the question that I have is that many folks listening to this will say to themselves something to the effect of, hey, I don't like it when a bad period at work manifests in a bad period at home. So because they don't like that feeling they pursue compartmentalization as the solution, but as you've just articulated, that's like chasing the horizon, right? You're kind of never going to get there, at least in a long term sustainable way. So I guess the question is, if compartmentalization isn't the goal, if it's not the solution, if it's not the thing that we ought to strive for like, what is?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 27:22

Integration. So it is learning how to address the challenges through emotion regulation, which is separate from your thoughts, and being able to tease those out and to talk yourself down from the catastrophic thinking that I find most founders and sometimes CEOs go through. And again, very different population of a CEO who's leading a public company, a publicly traded company, and depending upon where they're at in the arc of the business. But I can tell you without a doubt, early stage or even mid stage founders are on a constant roller coaster ride between runway and trying to make sure they don't have to do layoffs or minimize layoffs. And they just have such a strong sense of responsibility to the people that they employ and certainly to the investors who invested in them, I find. So the compartmentalization doesn't work, because they are under constant threat. And then, from a psychological standpoint, when we operate from constant threat, we're operating from a fear or flight of, you know, where we go into our anxiety and when we're in that state of survival, we can't operate well, and so you have to learn to regulate your emotions in that moment have a partner who has learned his or her or their own regulation tools for themselves. Co regulate together when one partner is a little bit too high on their fight or flight, bring that down and get grounded and get centered and address the problem head on. It's the not confronting the challenges as they're unfolding and sort of like turning a blind eye to it a little bit by compartmentalizing it, that then creates this, what feels like enormous uphill battle that feels like I'll never get there. And that catastrophic thinking, or black and white thinking, makes it nearly impossible for a founder to reconcile managing all of it. Does that make sense?

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Steve Divitkos 29:48

Does this ever accidentally backfire? So it makes total sense to me that like you know, whether you're consciously aware of it or not, if your mind interprets something as an issue of survival, it's unfair at best, impossible at worst, to ask yourself to ignore it, right? Compartmentalize might be just a different word for like, selectively ignore. So that makes sense to me. Where I could see this potentially accidentally backfiring is if I come home at the end of the day and I tell my wife about what I think is an existential issue, and in her efforts to kind of talk me off the ledge, for lack of a better way to put it, she might give her opinion as to why this thing might not be an existential issue. That would be her attempt to help, but I can totally see myself saying, Oh, you don't get it. You've never been an entrepreneur. You don't understand how serious the situation is. Can you just talk to us about situations like that and the extent to which that actually happens in your practice?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 30:45

So Steve, this is exactly the point that I was trying to make moments ago. It's just each person in that relationship needs to understand their own emotion and how to contain them and how to show up what we would call holding environment for our partner when they have big fields. Okay, so number one, what I find the most to be true about a lot of founders is they need to build their window of tolerance for handling difficult emotions. A lot of I would say founders, and I'm going to make this a little bit more of a gender thing, men, I find have a hard time navigating their difficult emotions. They don't want to feel them. They want to completely suppress them. But then those percolate in different ways with the partner, because they the partner feels the distance. They feel alone. They don't feel brought in. And oftentimes, a partner when they hear their partner come home and they don't want to talk about it, and the partner at home is like, but I want to talk about it because that makes them feel a part of it and like they're sharing together. The founder will come in and just either have big emotions and expect the partner to regulate them, which is not their job, though, we do want to support our partner. But the other challenges that the partner you're talking about is that they don't know how to show up for their partner. And that is why developing the techniques and the skill set to what we call a holding environment to be able to show up for their partner, so that the partner, the founder, can trust that if they do come home and share and share, and this actually just happened with a couple yesterday, that it's going to land that what they that what they are needing in that moment is going to get met. So for example, if you come home and you share with your partner, you know that you're having a hard day, and she goes into advice giving. I agree. I would get annoyed, because you just want to share in that moment, and so you're getting frustrated, and you're going to learn not to bother, because there's going to be an unmet need there. So one of the things that's very important that spouses understand is how to create this holding environment for the partner so that the partner wants to come home and share with them. They don't want to be told what to do. They don't want to be asked a million questions to help them process it. They want to have someone who sits there and can say, that sounds like you're really frustrated. And then they'll say, Yeah, I'm really frustrated at X, Y, and Z. And then you'll be like, Wow, that you know, that sounds like something that. So you start asking questions of curiosity, not about getting to solving the problem, because usually the entrepreneur can do that for him or herself. But it's more about holding the conversation and the emotion so that the partner can express what it is they want or need. Partner gets very curious and but not overly curious, not overly invested in fixing or or finding a solution. It's just holding the space and the emotional energy in the room to sort of allow the founder to release the stressors and all their emotions and thoughts. It's almost like taking the air out of a balloon. Does that make sense?

**S****Steve Divitkos 34:01**

Yeah. I mean, the two words that we discussed a few minutes ago was explicit and deliberate. And I wonder if this is an instance in which we just need to be more explicit and deliberate with our partners about what we actually need when we come home with a problem or in a unpleasant emotional state. Because a couple years ago, when I published that blog post, I actually ran a survey of both entrepreneurs and their spouses, and one of the you know, screamingly obvious conclusions as a result of that survey data was that CEOs were not sure of the extent to which they should share their stressors with their partner, right? Like, on one hand, I think they recognized, hey, communication is part of a healthy and functioning relationship. But on the other hand, I guess out of good intentions, they almost wanted to, like, shield or protect their partner from the day to day stresses. So can you talk to those CEOs? Was the large number of them that kind of filled out the survey in that way is, is it really an issue of, hey, just be explicit with your partner about, you know, let's not get in problem solving mode. Let's just get in listening mode. Or am I oversimplifying?

**D****Dr. Jennifer Musselman 34:47**

No, but what you're tapping into, again, I would go back to the basics. It is, most people don't know what they need. So to be deliberate explicit, you have to actually know yourself well enough to know when you are coming home talking to your partner, what is it you're wanting or needing from them? Most people don't actually know what that is. Hence why then they get into these fights or leave feeling like they didn't get their needs met. They don't even know what they are. So to ask our partner to do that for us, or hope that they can without explicitly being explicit and explicit and deliberate about it, it's hard because they often don't know for themselves. But that also goes back to why I was saying that the partner needs to also be able to manage their own emotions. Because if a CEO is coming home and is trying to be protective, if you will, to not stress their partner out, Well, number one, most spouses feel the distance or the stress that's not being articulated that causes their partners more stress, right? It is this misnomer to believe that by withholding information, we're then preventing stress. And in fact, what happens is we start filling in the gaps as partners that they're upset with us, something else must be going on. Now you start building a case in your head about the relationship itself, you start not having sexual intimacy because people start kind of shutting down, believing that there's a bigger problem with the relationship at home. When in fact, all it may simply be that the CEO just did not want to stress the partner out and kind of just shut down or close down on any of the stressors, but your partners feel it, And that is where the bigger problems start coming in. So sharing, it is important, but the how you share it matters, right? Again, it's like, are you sharing I'm feeling stressed because, you know, we've got a little bit less runway than we were expecting, and so we're just having to work through that? Now that's inviting the partner in. And again, to your point, that partner needs though, to have the technique and skill to know how to show up so that the CEO recognizes, hey, I can share this and it not tip my partner into like this distressed state. And that feels good for both people.

**S****Steve Divitkos 37:43**

Yeah. So one, actually practical experience share that I can provide was, interestingly, the other way around. So this was my wife, when she was experiencing stressful situations, kind of coming home to me, and we kind of settled on this term. It's very inelegant, like we called it an emotional dumping ground, and we said, look, if you have, to use your words big feelings, right? Those feelings like have to go somewhere. And in the absence of another outlet, there was basically no choice but for those feelings to be entirely thrown onto me, for lack of a better way to put it. And what we realized is that I was accidentally my wife's only emotional dumping ground, and so when she ended up working with a therapist, we almost accidentally, not necessarily by design, ended up having much more constructive, meaningful conversations because all those big feelings, she suddenly had another outlet, and suddenly I was not the only outlet that she had, because, again, those feelings had to go somewhere.

**D****Dr. Jennifer Musselman 38:47**

Yeah. I mean, that's a great example. It doesn't matter if it's the spouse or if it's the CEO or founder. I always say our partners can't be our everything, even though we hope them to be that's actually not a realistic expectation or standard. I like to joke like I have many different types of shoes for different occasions, and I do have a core set of shoes that are kind of like my kicks that I would wear for most things, but I'm not going to wear my kicks to a gala event, right? And that just is sort of like a very simplistic visual to help people understand that we need other so friends. And this is why, like for the spouse, the spouses of entrepreneurs or CEOs, like having other women or men that are in their same circumstance as friends or joining, like a YPO or an EO, it's really helpful to help people understand their worldview. The worldview that you share, and also someone, though, who's skilled like a therapist in dealing with these very emotionally charged circumstances. Situations and to help you both offload them to your point, but also to develop the techniques in the moment, to be able to show up for yourself without abandoning yourself and your needs, while showing up for your partner with what it is that they're wanting or needing as well.

**S****Steve Divitkos 40:16**

I'd love if you could talk to us about the idea of guilt. And the reason why I asked this question is because this was another survey response that came back with an overwhelming degree of frequency. So essentially, most of the CEOs who filled out the survey were aware of where they were not doing particularly well as spouses or parents or community members or whatever, and this created a sense of guilt for them. They basically said, Hey, I know that I should do better. I want to do better, but I just kind of feel as if I'm unable to do so. And obviously, without attribution, some CEOs, I just copied and pasted a few responses that I got just to illustrate what I'm talking about. One said, I feel, I routinely feel like I'm disappointing her. Another one to illustrate the point is it has created a quote forever debt in our relationship. So I'd love for you to just riff on this idea of guilt, and I want to keep that purposely broad, and have have you take that in any direction you'd like.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 41:18

Yeah. So guilt can be both a very harmful tool, or it can also be simultaneously very helpful. Guilt is what prevents people from feeling, right or over indexing on, you know, for me, over indexing on chocolate ice cream, the guilt is can be helpful. It's when guilt becomes the state of being and starts crossing over into shame. And I'm not sure. In fact, I should just say I'm pretty confident most people don't know the difference between guilt and shame. I see that frequently. So when the guilt is I'm tired of disappointing her. Well, that's that's not that's actually a pretty good use of guilt, if it's only I'm constantly feeling like I'm disappointing her, and it can be a motivator to do something about it. However, what I find is that when someone makes a statement that's so broadly like that, and it's a constant state of being that's dipping you more into shame. And shame, it's not about my behavior. It's instead an internalized belief about myself. So guilt is I'm disappointing her because I'm not, you know, showing up at home in time for dinner, or not helping as much around the house. Those are behaviors outside of someone that you can do something about. Externalized. Shame, when I hear someone say, I'm so tired of disappointing her, I start going, and then what does that mean? That may mean that I am a disappointment, that therefore means I can't measure up and I'm inadequate, right? And those are not conscious thoughts. Those are the subconscious beliefs that then drive our behaviors and our feelings toward ourself and our satisfaction toward our partners, and so making sure that, number one, the guilt that we feel about any of the you know, challenges that we've explored so far, stays in a ebb and flow, as opposed to a constant state of guilt. That's really important to address and illuminate and have conversations around because you can do something about that, but if it's a shame based experience, that is going to be detrimental and not helpful, and that really needs to be worked through with a therapist who's trained to separate the shame. When I hear about this forever debt, this is goes back to my original point around being explicit and deliberate with every agreement, with every negotiation, with our partner or with our board of directors, we need to recognize that with every decision we make, there is going to be a certain amount of loss in the decision that we didn't make. So we may agree with our spouse to say, Okay, fine, you go start this entrepreneurial venture. I'm going to be the supporter partner. You know, maybe they stay at home, or maybe they have a part time job, and you know whatever that looks like. And that means that they are they have agreed to a certain amount of sacrifice, and that doesn't mean that you're there forever in debt. It's an agreement that someone makes when they had conversations about going into business. In some ways, I imagine it's like what the Obamas might have gone through when he came home and said he wanted to run for President. It was an agreement that they probably made. I don't know them. I've never spoke to them. I. But as long as it's an explicit conversation, and there have been agreements, that idea of being in forever and debt that comes back to shame. That's not about she's an individual, he's an individual, or he and he or she and she, it is we individually came to this, we discussed it. We recognize that it's going to there's going to be somewhat of an imbalance in maybe taking care of the house, but we also acknowledge that some of that is going to hopefully pay off, and that we're both willing to take that risk, and that my partner believes in me. And that's where we want to release people from this, what you are calling guilt, but I argue, is dipping into shame, and that's not going to serve anybody, and that's when resentment does build.

S

Steve Divitkos 45:52

I'm interested what role our personal values play, because I've often said that if you were to randomly survey 100 entrepreneurs and ask them about their personal core values, they probably respond with something to the effect of A, family, B, health and C, work. But if you actually observe the behavior of those same 100 entrepreneurs to see what values would be suggested by their actual behavior, it would actually be the complete inverse. It would be work, first, health, second, family, third or something like that. I guess if somebody listening to this finds themselves living outside of alignment with their personal core values, and maybe that's bleeding into their spousal relationship, how might they begin to rectify that issue? Or is kind of knowledge power insofar as simply recognizing that you're living out of alignment with your value, maybe takes you halfway to the solution.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 46:45

I think I need you to explore that a little bit more with me. I'm not quite understanding what the question specifically is around values. Is it about around misalignment and not living in them?

S

Steve Divitkos 46:55

I think it goes back to being explicit with not just our partners, but with ourselves, right? So I think one exercise that I did that was very valuable for me was actually surfacing and writing down my personal core values. And as a result of doing that, I could look at them and regularly evaluate the extent to which I was actually living in alignment with them. What I've observed in my peers as CEOs is that A, most have never even thought about certainly never have documented their own personal core values. And B, even if they did, they often find themselves living out of alignment. They often say general platitudes, like my family always comes first. But they would never think twice about missing five dinners in a row because their behavior suggests that Work comes first. So for those who maybe have arrived at a conclusion that say, Hey, I say my family is most important, but my behavior is clearly suggesting that work is most important, what might they begin to do to change their lives in such a way that they can start living more in alignment with their values, where their family and their health do indeed come before their work?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 48:07

Yeah, listen, I'm going to, let's just be honest, there are going to be times in a business life cycle where the business does have to come first, and as long as those are snapshots in time and not the constant state of being, and that the partner understands that and agrees to that. I think that is okay, and it's not necessarily living out of alignment. It's just as if you have a child that's like deeply ill, you have to put that child first and make sure you're doing your full diligence and trying to find a cure. And that is what we need to do, in terms of, like, our values, what I agree with you on, especially, is that most people don't know what their core values are and or they just overly generalize them. But more, not just not know what they are, they also don't know how to prioritize which ones. There are priorities on some of these. And I always say to my clients, order them in your in the priority of of how you prioritize them in this moment or for this year, but they're going to flip at some point. And doing a check in, I would say, at minimum annually about do I still hold this one most important, or does this one come third because of what the stage of the business is in, or at what stage my family is in. And to your question about living in alignment or not living in alignment, what can they do? Number one is they need to pause. And what I find that most people who are higher performing individuals or entrepreneurs, they suck at pausing. They aren't very good at taking a break and going slower, but that is what is going to get them to where they want to go faster, and they don't recognize that. So when I say go, pause and go slower. I don't mean forever. I mean taking time each week to self reflect, journal, and really recognize to your point that they are living out of alignment with what how they want to live their lives. They often dismiss what their partner or other people the board of directors are saying as like, well, they don't get what it's like to be me, when they are living out of alignment because they aren't taking time to address the problems. And a lot of times they don't want to address the problems because they don't know how to solve them. And a lot of times that is because they're just so trying to A, avoid or B, quickly move through whatever they need to get done because they're trying to reach a goal, and that's where I go back to. And that's why they need to pause sort of level set and move forward again to ensure that they are living in alignment with what they profess to be their values, and also do a gut check those are still the values, and as I said earlier, am I prioritizing the values in accordance with where the phase of my life or my business or my relationship is?

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Steve Divitkos 51:10

Yeah, I love this idea of allowing ourselves to kind of oscillate based on the circumstances. So for example, in the same way that we understandably shouldn't expect to work 90 hours a week every week for, you know, weeks and weeks and weeks on end. Yeah, we also in the pursuit of balance, also reasonably shouldn't expect to be home at 5pm every night for dinner if the circumstances dictate that. That's not what we should be doing. I remember when I was talking to my own CEO peer group about this. I was a member of EO for about seven years. We were kind of talking about this issue, and a CEO peer of mine made this funny but ultimately true statement. He said, Look, LeBron James was not worried about driving his kid to school on game seven of the NBA Finals, like he was dialed in that day. He was all work and no play. And in a similar spirit, we should allow ourselves to be human and allow ourselves to oscillate between prioritizing family or prioritizing work, and we shouldn't necessarily feel bad if we're not home at five every day for dinner.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 52:19

Yeah, we'd agreed that that is true, and I think where disappointment and resentment comes in is where those agreements have been made, and then they we have what we would call a rupture and trust in a relationship, because the partner deems, I shouldn't say the partner. I'll say the entrepreneur, just to keep it clear, the entrepreneur, the CEO, all of a sudden deems work is more important consistently when there was already this agreement made, so they're not honoring the agreement with their partner, then that is where the fighting start happens, because the partner starts feeling deprioritized and not important. And instead of saying, Hey, there's this time, we're going through, whatever it is that we're going through, it's going to last about two months. I really need some extra grace and some patience here. I'm there are probably going to be times that I can't come home for dinner, and it may be last minute, and just I need you to know that it won't be like that forever. So give me till March, but I will try to come home when I can. But I do want to let you know that this is going to be a really hard ride for me for the next couple of months, and I don't know that I'm going to be able to honor every week coming home for dinner like as we've agreed to. Having that conversation preemptively, just level sets for the partner what to expect that it's not that they don't care about the family, or that they don't matter, or that the partner is not important, but that they just allows a partner, then hopefully to show up with more grace and patience during an otherwise difficult time. But again, it goes back to being explicit deliberate, and knowing what each person needs or wants at any given time or snapshot of time in their lives.

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Steve Divitkos 54:03

So I want to ask you about the non entrepreneur in the relationship and their career considerations, because when I administered this survey a couple years ago, I got an interesting set of responses from the spouses. And basically they said, at the risk of paraphrasing, they said, look with a view towards being a good spouse, I more or less agreed to de prioritize my own professional ambitions to support the professional ambitions of my partner. However, over years, some spouses started to report that they made what they classified as being too many personal or career sacrifices, and they now kind of regret having done so, and many reported feeling stuck, unfulfilled, even quietly resentful. So can you speak to those spouses who might be listening to this and maybe talk about like, how can we balance being a supportive spouse, well simultaneously avoiding the risk of almost sacrifice saying too much, because that, in and of itself, is a risk that has to be managed?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 55:04

So I'm super glad we're talking about this, because I'm a big fan of not self abandoning. Number one, I do think in part of where it's possible, bringing on as many resources to help a family or a spouse navigate doing a lot of life alone, meaning when they are the agreed upon partner to manage the household in general, and kids and social and medical all the stuff, to give them a reprieve and support that the entrepreneurial partner can't provide because they're so focused on their business. So sorry, I just forgot the question.

S

Steve Divitkos 55:49

No. The question is, how do they avoid making too many career sacrifices such that they don't grow to become like quietly resentful over time? Because many make those sacrifices because they want to be the quote, unquote, good, supportive spouse, but you also don't want to overdo it, because to use your words, you end up kind of sacrificing yourself, which likely isn't a healthy alternative.

D

Dr. Jennifer Musselman 56:19

I mean, the conversation needs to be a fluid conversation. So, for instance, you know a partner, and a lot of this comes back down to modeling or generations of how to do life, or how to do marriage or relationships. So, for instance, the spouse may enter an agreement or an understanding with an entrepreneur of how we're going to do it, but that's based on what was modeled for them, what their generation was sort of taught or told to them about how to do relationships. But then as they grow, I mean, there have been at least six different people in the many years I've been alive, they start getting more clear on who they are, they start getting more clear on, like, what works for them too or doesn't work for them. And that's why there needs to be this safe container, what we call holding environment, for these conversations about, yeah, I know we said that, you know, I would be The Stay At Home partner and, you know, manage everything, and I want to be supportive in that, but this isn't the way to do it any more. I've shifted. I've changed, and taking the accountability and acknowledging that they've changed, or their needs have shifted, helps the entrepreneur or the CEO to digest it right, because then they're not being blamed. They're not being resented toward for it being set up that way. So if the spouse acknowledges, I know I agree to that, and that worked for when it worked, but it no longer works for me. How can we do this differently so I can get these other needs met? And as long as the entrepreneur, CEO is open to being willing to be flexible where possible. That's where the relationship thrives. That's where the spouse can feel like, hey, they're just as important. And I do recognize that that's going to come with some things that we just can't do because of, you know, how we originally set things up, but where possible, if the spouse feels like and believes that the entrepreneur is trying to meet their needs and trying to help them get their needs met, that almost goes as far as actually getting their needs met. Does that make sense?

S

Steve Divitkos 58:40

It does. And what I love about that answer is it suggests a very tactical item that folks can do, which is at some agreed upon cadence, whatever it is, quarterly, annually, whatever the case may be, just revisit the agreements that you've made as a partnership and ask like, is this agreement still appropriate for today's circumstances? It was probably appropriate for 12 months ago. Is it still appropriate for today? And actually, where I want to conclude with you is to really get as tactical as we possibly can and discuss some of the practices or rituals or routines that couples can use and put into their calendars to overcome some of the challenges that we've discussed. So certainly that's one, revisiting your agreements see whether they're still appropriate. Two, the other one I loved was a support group. So like you said, EO and YPO, they exist as like peer support groups for entrepreneurs, but both offer spousal support groups where you can talk about all the stuff you're going through that nobody else seems to understand. What are the other like rituals and practices and routines that you would suggest people do at a very, very tactical level to maybe either deal with or maybe avoid some of the challenges that we've talked about today?

**D****Dr. Jennifer Musselman 1:00:00**

Certainly, I'm obviously going to advocate for a regular therapist or a very skilled executive coach who specializes in this, and I will acknowledge that most people find me because there aren't as many therapists that are trained in this particular subset, and a lot of coaches aren't able to sort of provide the deep, felt care. Some are really great, but there are. They're just not, as you know. Some aren't just as academically skilled and frankly, licensed to be able to do that. The other piece is self care. And I know that that sounds like such a broad term, but knowing what makes you feel more centered and grounded is critical. And making sure your partner understands that those activities make you feel more grounded and centered is important. Because I see a lot of times in my practice where, like, one partner is like, not been able to work out, and the other partner is just like, it's just a workout. Like, what's the big deal? And they don't understand that. That is how their partner reconnects to self and gets grounded. And so resentment builds, and resentment builds when one especially after kids enter the picture, and the one partner goes off and goes running, if that's their groundedness, and the other partner gets resentful because they can't go do that for their own groundedness. So making sure to show up for each other and build in the time for each partner to get their need met around self care and groundedness is a critical mass, and understanding that that's what that means, that what that behavior is, a technique for our relationship, not just for the individual, right? So yeah, and I think I know we live in a very privileged world, but the more people you can bring on to support you, and I'm not saying to not raise your own children, because I'm from the Midwest. I'm a firm believer in that, there weren't a lot of nannies where I grew up. But I am a huge fan of like a sleep nurse when you have a child, because that is hugely disruptive to the relationship. Not just the individual that has to go into their build their business. Or a family members that can come babysit on the regular so that you can have a date night. You know, those kinds of actual tangible, I'm going to call them luxuries, really should almost be considered mainstay for the relationship success, for business success, and for the individual to get grounded and get centered. Businesses that don't provide those kinds of resources, they assume it's being handled through, you know, what they pay their CEOs, don't recognize that they're not forcing their CEOs to take that time and to utilize their money that way. Which I understand they can't technically, but I would highly recommend that if it's a CEO who's working for a publicly traded company, they should be forcing them to take vacations and partnerships, taking vacations with their partners, and because that is going to be ultimately what prevents a good share of burnout. And I see a lot of burnout, whether it's with a founder or with a CEO.

**S****Steve Divitkos 1:03:29**

Yeah, times two for night nurses. I have two young kids, and we utilize the services of night nurses for both, and we almost felt guilty because it felt so like decadent. It did feel like such a luxury. But at the end of the day, we've, both, my wife and I have organized our lives in such a way that, like, sleep is number one, and it beats everything, every other consideration, every other challenge, every other way to spend time, sleep wins 100% of the time. And as a result, instead of buying a new TV or the new pair of shoes or whatever the case may be, that's where we decided to allocate our money. And I would sing that from the mountaintops for those dealing with newborns, because, boy, is it a challenge to go through two to five months in an entirely sleep deprived state.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 1:04:18

I couldn't agree more, and I'm so glad you're singing the praises of that, because I find a lot of people do feel guilty for that, and it does feel like a luxury, and again, you're privileged. So it is at the same token, like the world wasn't designed this way, way back when, literally, like people took care of each other's kids, and we don't live that same way anymore. So we do, hopefully wants to provide ourselves with that support or that resource, because sleep will is not or rather, lack of sleep is not good for anyone.

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Steve Divitkos 1:04:51

So as we conclude today, knowing that we're speaking to entrepreneurs and CEOs, and presumably their spouses in today's episode, is there any thoughts or comments or questions that you'd like to leave the audience with? Was there anything unsaid from our conversation today that you think ought to be said?

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 1:05:16

Each side, meaning the founder and their spouse has their own unique set of pain or challenges and stress that come along with being in that role that they show up with, or hopefully have agreed to. I think where I see the biggest struggle is, and I'm just and I'm going to sound like a broken record, is that people do not know how to regulate their own emotion. And when you were running a company, or you're the spouse of someone, you need to know how to regulate your own emotion, which is not suppressing your emotion, which is not becoming hyper emotional, it is knowing how to share and express your emotion in a way that is measured. That is not attacking, that is just acknowledging and wanting your partner to be able to hear it and for it to land, and then to be able to take into consideration, how do we work together to solve for it? If people could just become more concentrated on their own needs, their own triggers, and then learn the tools of how to show up with a holding environment for their partner. This would go these partnerships would just be so much more delightful and so much less taxing, and people could be so much more successful. Unfortunately, most people don't spend enough time on developing those techniques, understanding themselves better and understanding their partners better.

S

Steve Divitkos 1:06:45

So the best way to work on a relationship is to start by working on yourself.

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Dr. Jennifer Musselman 1:06:50

Amen.

**S** Steve Divitkos 1:06:52

Dr Musselman, thank you so much for joining us today.

**D** Dr. Jennifer Musselman 1:06:55

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.