Communication Miracles for Couples
Guest: Jonathan Robinson
Host: Noel Meador
Noel: Hey, welcome to Oxygen365. I'm your host, Noel Meador, and you are watching Episode 8. On today's show, I'll be interviewing Jonathan Robinson. He's a psychotherapist. He's the author of ten books, including today's focus, Communication Miracles for Couples, which is a New York Times bestseller. Jonathan has made his appearance on CNN and “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” His work has appeared in Newsweek, USA Today, and The Los Angeles Times. Jonathan, welcome to the show.

Jonathan: Thanks, Noel. I'm really happy to be here.

Noel: Yeah, I'll tell you, this is a huge topic that we constantly are dealing with when we're working with couples on communication. Today, we're going to focus on how we can increase the intimacy and decrease the conflict. I can't think of a better person to help us in that. So I'm gonna jump right in there. You talk about in your book each individual having an emotional bank account. What is that? How do you increase the emotional bank account in the relationship?

Jonathan: Well, like any bank account, you can easily go bankrupt if you keep on taking withdrawals, if you do behavior that your partner doesn't like, or if you're away, or any of those things, can lead to zero. At zero, people want to get divorced. So that's a really key question. I think that there's what I call the three As for putting money or love in that bank account. One is appreciation. You know, simply asking yourself, "What do I love or appreciate about my partner?" and telling them. Because a lot of times, we have those things in our head, but we don't actually express them. I'm a guy, so I'm a little challenged when it comes to relationships. I ask that question to myself every day and I tell my wife one thing a day like that, and that helps.

Noel: Yeah.

Jonathan: Another thing is just accepting your partner the way they are because nobody likes to think, “One day I'll be okay,” you know. So accept your partner. But the most important thing is something I call acknowledgement. Acknowledgement is really understanding and empathy. That is something that we're not trained in. Most people are trained more in how to drive a car than they ever learn about communication. In a way, that's good news because once you learn a little bit of communication and a little bit of empathy, it goes a long way.

Noel: You know, it's so true. That whole thing about empathy is such a huge thing. I think a lot of times people are confused even by the definition of empathy. What would be your definition of empathy?
Jonathan: Emotionally understanding what your partner's experiencing, and feeling that and understanding it. If your partner says, "I'm sick and tired of you doing blah, blah, blah, blah," defending yourself is not empathy. Telling them how they're wrong is not empathy. Trying to fix the problem is not empathy.

Noel: Right. Right.

Jonathan: I actually have a tool in the book that's really simple. Because, as I said, being a guy, I didn't get trained in any of this stuff. So the tool is to say, "It sounds like blank, that must feel blank. So it sounds like you're really stressed, that must be really frustrating. It sounds like you missed me; you must feel really lonely." That's understanding your partner's emotions and people want that more than anything. You know, in real estate, it's location, location, location. In relationships, it's understanding, understanding, understanding.

Noel: Wow, yeah. That's so true. You know, even on this thing of empathy, not to belabor the point, but I think there's even confusion around this idea of sympathy versus empathy. Have you found that to be the case? How would you define the two? How would you separate the two? Because I think they're quite different.

Jonathan: Yeah. Well, sympathy is kind of looking down from above and saying, "Boy, it sounds like you're having a hard time." People generally don't like sympathy because it's kind of condescending. Empathy is where you're on the level and you're feeling that person's pain, without fixing it or giving advice, but you really understand it and feel it for yourself. So it's a very different experience for the person receiving it.

Noel: Yeah. I found it to be true that very rarely or hardly ever does the phrase "at least..." come from an empathetic place of understanding. You talk about in your book this whole concept of the blame detector. Why is that? What causes the blame detector to go off in our spouse or partner? How can we deal with that?

Jonathan: Well, the idea in the book is that everybody has this gland in the middle of their brain, that when they hear blame in any form, their ears immediately shut off completely. So no communication is happening there.

Noel: Right.

Jonathan: We're all very sensitive to blame. So, you might think that you're being very subtle and very secretive about it, but your partner will get it
immediately and they won't hear because it shuts off their canals. So, knowing that blame doesn't work is really helpful because it always creates separation. If you look at the word “intimacy,” the instructions for finding it are in the word: into-me-see. When we make ourselves vulnerable and are honest about things in that way, it creates connection. But when we blame, we're basically saying, "You're wrong and I'm right." Most people—and if I say to you, "No, you're wrong; you did this, that, and the other thing; you should see how wrong you are," rarely are they going to say, "My gosh! You're right! Thank you for telling me that. Now that I see the errors of my ways, I will have to change." That has never happened. Right?

Noel: Unless they're drugged or something. Yeah, that would be the only time it probably would happen. Yeah.

Jonathan: So what we have to do is learn how to communicate in a way that our partners can hear us, even if they're doing something that we don't like. That's a skill that I teach in the book. It's a skill that can luckily be learned relatively quickly. If you don't know that skill, it's like you go into a relationship with two strikes. It's really easy to then third strike and you're out.

Noel: So, I'm just going to have to ask you, what is the skill? I mean, how would I move away from blame and really increase the intimacy in the relationship?

Jonathan: The most important skill is this idea of understanding your partner's experience, or what I call empathy. So let's have a mock argument, Noel, if that's okay?

Noel: Sure. Well, I'll have to say I'm pretty good at it.

Jonathan: Okay. So complain to me about how I didn't call you and I've been late, and just have been a good for nothing whatever.

Noel: All right. I can role play this one. You know, Jonathan, it's so frustrating. My days are stacked. I'm just crazy busy and the fact that I sat here for ten minutes waiting for you, quite honestly, it's just frustrating.

Jonathan: Well, it sounds like you're really hurt by my being late and not calling you.

Noel: Yeah. And to add insult to injury, the fact is that not only did I try to call you, you know, I picked up the phone and then I tried to Skype you. It just seems like you're disconnected on the other end.
Jonathan: It sounds like you're really frustrated with me. I can understand that you feel like I've been really inconsiderate.

Noel: The defusing is already happening. I really like you man. I see what you're saying.

Jonathan: What I'm doing is—until you feel I understand—until you feel that I care, you don't care what I have to say.

Noel: Yeah. Right.

Jonathan: So, once you feel like I got you, then we can actually have a communication. Let's say I just saved three people's lives in an auto accident. That's why I'm late.

Noel: Right.

Jonathan: Okay. You don't care about that until you feel like I really understand how you're frustrated and you feel hurt. Once you understand that, then you'll be ready to say, "So what happened?" And then I can tell you. But if I try to defend myself or say, "Well, it was because the boss did this," or "there was an auto accident," you know, well, you're only saying that, and that doesn't work. So this formula: "It sounds like blank. It sounds like you're really stressed out. That must be really frustrating having to deal with my being late," that's the essence. You don't have to go into a long explanation. You just have to meet that person as to what they're experiencing. Once you have that, it opens up the door to all other kinds of communication.

Noel: Yeah. I would say that you're disarming the defense mechanism, which opens the pathway for communication.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Noel: Tell us a little bit about the exercises that you recommend to couples who really want to increase the intimacy, which oftentimes is connected to how well you can communicate.

Jonathan: Well, one of the things I notice is a lot of times people are frustrated and hurt and they just need to vent. So, doing this thing of talking about their day, and then having just a few words feeding back what you heard them say. If you watch Oprah, she does this all the time some days on her show. Oprah says,
"Wow. That must have really put you through the ringer," or "Wow; that's painful." That's all she's doing. She gets paid $100 million a year to do that.

Noel: That's a great job.

Jonathan: It's not rocket science, but most people can't do it. So that's why she gets paid so well. Now, that's one thing. You can also simply have little things where you connect emotionally by having your partner talk about what their day was like, or talk about their life, and just listen and occasionally say, "Tell me more." You know, most of us don't get that space to actually just be who we are without being fixed or manipulated in some way. So with my wife, you know, she'll talk about her day. When she takes a breath, I'll say, "Tell me more about that." As a guy, if I stay on script, it usually goes well.

Noel: The script. I think most guys, we feel most empowered to offer the "well, let me help fix your problem or solve your problem," when generally, she's asking for "just listen; I just want you to listen to what's going on in my life."

Jonathan: Yeah. In reality, women or men, are open to having their problem fixed once they feel fully understood. So it's a two-step process. If you get to Step Two before Step One, it goes horribly. If somebody feels really understood and heard, they're usually visibly relaxed. "Yeah, that's it. Exactly." Once they feel fully understood and connected emotionally, then you can say, "Would you like some ideas as to what might help with that?" And, usually, I ask that question. "Would you like to hear my ideas as to what might help with that?" If they say yes, then you have permission to give them. If you just try to solve their problem, it's like you haven't gotten the permission and it usually doesn't go well.

Noel: What you're describing right there is every wife's dream. I think a lot of guys are like, "Okay. I'm going to log that one away because it was really, really helpful." What about the spouse who does not feel like they're listened to? What would you say to them? Whether it's male or female, how do you get them more engaged in listening or being heard? Maybe not so much listening; it's being heard for what they're feeling.

Jonathan: Well, would you role-play that person and I'll demonstrate it? Because we can talk about it, but actually, we haven't seen many examples in movies. So, we don't really know what good communication looks like. And role-playing, it is actually, "Oh, that's right. That would be what I want."

Noel: Okay. So what am I role-playing? I'm not sure if I understand.
Jonathan: So role-play the frustrated spouse.

Noel: That doesn't feel heard?

Jonathan: Yeah.

Noel: Okay.

Jonathan: Be as obstinate and difficult as possible.

Noel: Okay. I'm going to take off the nice guy Noel, insert mean-spirited Noel. You know, Jonathan, I've just had it with our relationship. It just seems like every time I come to share what's going on in my life, you either are aloof, or you're too busy, or you're just disinterested in my concerns with what's going on in my life, and I'm sick and tired of it.

Jonathan: Sounds like you're coming to the end of your rope.

Noel: Oh, I'm already past the end of the rope. I'm up to here.

Jonathan: So you're just through with it, pretty much.

Noel: Yeah.

Jonathan: I can tell you're really angry.

Noel: Yeah, that would be understatement.

Jonathan: Yeah. Well, what can I do for you now? I know that you're really angry. I think you have every right to be angry. I want to talk about what's going on behind that anger.

Noel: I just want to be heard.

Jonathan: So you don't feel heard at all?

Noel: No. I feel like it's a one-way communication track here.

Jonathan: Well, tell me more about what you want to tell me.

Noel: You know, it's my feelings.

Jonathan: So we can put that on pause right now. It's like...
Noel: How did I do, Jonathan?

Jonathan: You have a hard time knowing even how to proceed because, as you said, I'm disarming you. See, normally, if you have one force going against another, then you have an argument and it can go on forever. But if you're going this way and I'm going with you, then all that gets dissipated and then we could get down to the real issue of what you want. Then I can ask you, "Well, what specifically would you like that you're not getting?" Then we can get into negotiation, which is where you want to go. You don't want to go into who's right, who's wrong, which is how it always goes. You want to go into, "Okay. How can we make this work? What specific changes can we make that would work for both of us?"

Noel: So you're talking like a fifty-fifty compromise?

Jonathan: No. Sometimes it is. Most of what people want is to be heard. So, once you've done that, everything else goes better. But there are some times you have to work things out: money, sex connection, all these bigger issues.

Noel: You really listed the big ones right there.

Jonathan: Yeah. You have to work some of those out. Now, what I find is if you can give your partner the most important thing, which is empathy and being heard, they're much looser with how the specifics go. You know, it's like if you give people exactly the thing that's most important to them, all the other things, I can play with that. So once they're heard, then you can work out the money thing, usually in just a couple minutes, because you're on the same team. See, when you're on the same team, it's easy to work things out. When you're on different teams, it's just an argument.

Noel: You know, when it comes to what we're talking about, it would seem to me that this is really predicated on establishing trust in the relationship. I mean, being able to communicate and express empathy, receive empathy, be heard, all that. I think the baseline or foundation is trust. I have to believe there's listeners right now that are saying, "You don't understand my story. In my story, the trust has been broken. All this means nothing to me because of that trust issue." What would you say to that in terms of repairing the relationship?

Jonathan: Well, I have a chapter in the Communication Miracles for Couples book that's called "Repairing Broken Trust." It's a very precise formula and if you veer from the formula, it probably won't work.
Noel: Okay. You're going to tell us. Okay. This is good.

Jonathan: Now, the first part of the formula is what I said, the empathy. Rather than defending yourself, just trying to hear what your partner is saying and feeling their emotions. That's the first part. The second part is appreciating that they are communicating that, because if they're not even communicating that, you have no possibility of restoring trust.

So, you have to appreciate them for being willing to say, "This is what hurts." If trust has been violated, you have to apologize for what your part was. A good apology can go a long way and can really take only ten seconds. But most people, they don't apologize for anything. It's very hard to repair broken trust if neither partner is willing to apologize for anything.

So, sometimes I can't apologize for what my wife has blamed me for, but I can say, "Hey, I haven't been here for you the way I want to be," or "I've been really stressed out." So, I'll apologize for something and that goes a long way. Then there's other parts of the formula as well, but those are the most important parts, that you start communicating, you have emotional understanding, and that there be an apology for what you feel you could have done better.

Noel: Because I think that apology part is a pretty big deal. Oftentimes, couples have this idea, some of it is predicated on how big of the offense or the broken trust is. But oftentimes, there seems to be this mentality of like, "Well, I did that. I apologized." It was relegated to a onetime event versus the understanding that this is a process that we have to work through of forgiveness. Even that, apology versus forgiveness, are pretty different. I mean, apology is the starting point, but forgiveness—the process—looks very different. What would you say to that? I do think a lot of couples get hung up on this part. You know, it's like, "Well, I said sorry 15 years ago." What would you say to that?

Jonathan: Well, first of all, some of these are detailed things that you have to do just right, and if you don't do it just right, it won't go well. So, if you say, "I already apologized for that," that's not what your partner wants to hear. They want to know if you're sincere and if you really feel their pain. Now, I hate apologizing because I'm always right. Why should I ever apologize?

Noel: This is being videoed.

Jonathan: In my mind, I'm always right. That's just what I got it.

Noel: I think a lot of people are nodding their heads, "Yeah, I totally agree."
Jonathan: So what I do, though, is I say, "Well, there's something I could have done better. So I apologize for something I really sincerely wish I could have done better." I think in my head, if I can apologize sincerely for that for ten seconds, I can save myself five hours of arguing. And it's true. I will sincerely say, "You know, I really didn't listen to you as well as I should have. I really want to be able to do that because you're really important to me. I understand it. You don't feel heard, and it's because I've been so preoccupied. I really am sorry about that." That took ten seconds and that phrase, when done sincerely, has actually saved me sometimes two days of fighting with each other. I think that this is crunch time. You know, sometimes you're in battle and you have to know exactly the right thing to do or you're going to suffer for years, or days, or whatever it is. I try and just get focused, and be sincere and vulnerable. Magic happens. Or, as I say in the book, miracles happen. Because trust, even if it's been broken and there's been infidelity, all kinds of stuff, I have seen it repaired in literally three minutes when people did the right thing. That's the power. Because people want it, our hearts want it. It feels horrible when we are separated from somebody we care about. So if we see that sincerity and people use the right methods, it's amazing how quickly that can be repaired. It's a miracle.

Noel: I would just say that that's an anomaly. That's not what typically happens. I'm just thinking of an infidelity, a three minute miracle, I think there's more to that process than a three minute being able to get on the other side of it. Would you agree with that?

Jonathan: Yeah, I would, but only because it takes a fair amount of training to get people to do those three minutes.

Noel: Okay.

Jonathan: I have seen it repaired in three minutes, once people actually did exactly the right thing. But it often can take a long time for people to be willing to do that appropriately, to really hear their partners. I had a couple that was arguing about an infidelity, had been doing it for twenty years for twenty hours a week. That's a long time now.

Noel: Yeah, that is a long time.

Jonathan: Once the wife saw that the guy really understood her pain, and he had tears going down his face as she was describing the pain. He said, "God, honey. I'm so sorry." And he really was. He said, "I never really got how painful this was for you." He was really, really sincere in his apology and they hugged.
said, "That's what I've been wanting these last twenty years...is for you to get that."

Noel: Wow.

Jonathan: They literally had one more session and they said, "We're good now," and they work.

Noel: Wow, that is a miracle. You know, what Jonathan is talking about is in his book, Communication Miracles for Couples. He really does outline all those steps, those methods that he's been discussing on the show. I would encourage you to pick up his book and everything. How to do that? Reference to his website is right below this video. John, I want to say thank you. Thank you for one, taking the time to write this, and two, to being on this podcast. It's been super helpful, I believe, for our listeners. So, thank you.

Jonathan: My pleasure, Noel.

Noel: All right. We're good.

Jonathan: Good.