



Episode 24: I'll Be Home for Christmas and in Therapy by New Years (Part One)

Craig: We are excited today to have our friends from LifeWorks counseling Roan and Eva Hunter back with us, Eva, thanks as always for being with us.

Eva: I'm happy to be here.

Craig: And Roan, I've just got one question for you. Why do the holiday sucks so bad?

Roan: Well, you know what we always say, I'll be home for Christmas and in therapy by new years, all the old stuff surfaces when we get back into those family environments.

Craig: I feel like I've been thinking about you guys being here today. And I think about those cartoons with the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other shoulder. And I haven't really determined yet. Who's the angel and who's, who's the devil, I guess that just depends on who the speaker is, but you know, divorce is challenging for anyone and when relationships break down, but it seems like those feelings are intensified during the holidays.

Roan: Oh, certainly it is. There's so much wrapped around the holidays from expectations to ideals. And then when we go through or struggling in the relationship and maybe we're not divorced with things, aren't good. There's a lot of pressure and when you have kids involved how that plays out because we want it to be perfect and life's just not perfect.

Matt: Yeah. And I think that there's a lot of romanticization about the way holidays are supposed to be or the way you remember them being, how they actually end up playing out, whether people are lonely or sad, depressed, or just so busy that they never even stopped to enjoy what the holiday season is really supposed to be about.

Eva: Yes. It can really set up a lot of disappointment instead of, uh, really being intentional, going into the holidays.

Craig: What do mean by that Eva intentional going into the holidays?

Eva: I think it just takes a lot of conversation between the partnership. This is what we want the holidays to look like, or this is what I would like for our holidays to look like. And then the other person says what they would like. And then we negotiate that out, being very aware of how we can overcome it and we want to do too much and end up being really tired and stressed and it shows up in the relationship.

Roan: Yeah. One of the things that we often say is that unspoken expectations are just premeditated

resentments, because I'll just, I'll use in my own family. Eva and I are from the same little hometown. And when we moved away, we would go back home and, you know, Eva's family, they plan things out like a year ahead. My family plans, nothing ever. And so we would come back home and the expectation like from my mother was that we're going to be at her house for Christmas dinner and Eva's family had already planned that about six months before, and then she would be disappointed or have her feelings hurt. And it was like, this isn't really on me, but it was an unspoken expectation that she had.

Craig: Yeah. What I'm hearing you say is just, there's an expectation of our families, whether it be the husband's family or the wives family with regard to how they've always expressed the holidays. And then when you put the couple together, they have to negotiate and manage that and just think about those couples that are in trouble. And so not only are they trying to manage or to navigate the immediate family dynamic, but then you've got the extended family dynamic to navigate as well. It's just more people involved.

Matt: Well, and another interesting thing, like in the example you just gave, you didn't even mention anything about what you and Eva wanted. And so I think that with holidays, it's very easy for people to get way too focused on what other people want and what other people's expectations are. And they don't do anything that they wanted to do, which obviously leads to resentment or further cementing, resentment that people have. And it just turns into this nasty cycle

Eva: That's right in, in our recovery and becoming more healthy in the way we communicated with our families. Like we would come up with our plan first and then we communicated out. And so we're very direct. We tell them, Hey, this is what we're planning on doing. Uh, we'll be here on this day and we've maybe been invited to a couple of things within the family, but we've already decided, but the, between the two of us, what events we're going to attend as a family.

Roan: Yeah. We kind of plan our holidays first in what we're going to do as a family and our family. We have two sons they're, they're grown now and they have their own families, but it became, our family was me, Eva and Rowe and Josh, and then everybody else were extras.

Matt: Yeah. And I know that that is a really difficult transition, you know, for some people. So, uh, just using like your children, for example, you know, it won't be long if it isn't already getting there now where they have their own family unit and there's going to be an element of you guys having to let go of some of that and then figuring out how they're going to, you know, carve out their own piece or the traditions they want to create for their family. And it's very difficult. And it's something that I don't feel like people ever talk about until wham. It's right there on top of you.

Eva: I feel like we've given our adult children really the freedom to let them tell us what their plans are. We may say, Hey, we're planning on doing Thanksgiving lunch. Come if you can, if you have other obligations, we certainly understand that. And our daughter-in-laws both have said, we're so grateful. I mean, you guys don't have a lot of expectations.

Roan: There is not a lot of pressure.

Eva: We love them. We want to spend time with them at the same time. We are very careful too, because we want our sons to leave Clean and weave with their own family.

Craig: Eva, you made a comment about after the discovery of an affair that the holidays can be particularly challenging. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Eva: Sure. I think that is one of the hardest anniversaries. Well, the first year after any loss, you know, for the next year is going to be very difficult for a partner or for someone who's been the betrayer or maybe the death of someone. And so it's really beginning to say, okay, what is it that I need to do for myself so that I do not lose my serenity so that I can be fully present with my children or with my extended family and with my God.

Craig: Is it the newness? Is it the expectation of what a person thinks things should be like?

Eva: Yes, I think so. I think it is that, you know what our culture says, Hey, the holidays are supposed to be so great and so connecting and the reality, it's really hard. I mean, I just recently heard a quote and I love this quote so much and the quote is life is hard. Thank goodness it's short. We can also say holidays are hard. Thank goodness, they're short. That's true.

Craig: You know, I think a little bit of a, maybe a common misconception that divorce lawyers, um, like Matt and myself gets super busy during the holidays, but I haven't really experienced that so far. I'm 20 years in now. And I've experienced that between that span of times, that short span of time between Thanksgiving and new years, people for the most part, try to figure it out and try to make it work. It's very uncommon that we're going to start some new nasty divorce, you know, the day after Thanksgiving or three days before Christmas, the only exception to that I think would be when there is a discovery of something, an affair or some earth shattering change that happens. And then we'll, we'll talk to those folks, but still rarely do we start something, Matt, would you agree with that?

Matt: Definitely agree. Uh, first I think that, you know, for people that are not walking through a divorce, but maybe are getting close to the edge there, I think people tend to set sort of natural, um, deadlines. And so they'll look at things like I'm going to give this through the holidays to either be because, they don't want to start a divorce during the holidays. Maybe they've already made up their mind, but they're not, they don't want to ruin the holidays for their family. Or I think just as common, they're hoping that something's going to change or it's going to get better. And it is a very natural deadline with it being the end of the year and everything they'll say, okay, I'm going to give it through Christmas or through the end of the new year. And sometimes those things don't get better. If anything, they get worse because like we were talking about holidays seem to just amplify the already pre-existing problem.

Matt: It's almost the same thing that we experienced during the spring of 2020 with everybody being on lockdown with COVID-19. And the difference is the holidays you got presents to buy and parties to go to and just over committed in every different direction. What happened with COVID-19 in the spring was everything stopped and there was nothing to do and the holidays are togetherness with more to do than you can get to.

Roan: Oh yeah. And it's like the stress that we're all under, just in general gets, as you said, Matt amplified and magnified during the holidays because you've got relational stress, we're all busy. Uh, you got financial stress. I mean, it is absolutely, you know, we, we spend too much, you know, presents and gifts and things that really nobody needs. And uh, we go crazy with that and that's all tied to kind of this idealism or ideal expectations of what it's supposed to be like. And we're so afraid of disappointing someone, whether it's our kids or spouse or even parents, or it doesn't matter. It's our own expectations that get us into a lot of trouble here.

Craig: We eat too much. We drink. We over commit. We spend too much. It's just a lot of too much happening during the holidays.

Matt: Yeah. And then on top of it all, you've got everybody glued to a social media screen and all you see is the perfect lives of everybody else. You know, this fake mirror that, that you know, that it's sending out, you know, everybody, else's Norman Rockwell, you know, holiday experience. And you're sitting there either thinking about strangling somebody, or you are actually strangling somebody.

Craig: So Eva, what advice would you give it a couples if you've got a couple in front of you, sitting in your counseling office and they're expressing stress and concerned about the holidays, there's that pull between the two of them about, um, what families are going to be with. And, you know, we, we oversimplify it and think that, you know, each side only has one family, but as we already know, there's, there's divorce. There's multiple families. It's almost like the movie four Christmases where there's lots of folks who want to spend time with you. So Eva, what is your best advice for a couple facing, um, the holiday season?

Eva: So I like to sit down with a couple and help them, uh, come up with a plan and really think about what it is they, the couple themselves want to do for the holidays. And then with that plan, how are they going to communicate that to everyone else and really how to keep it simple?

Craig: And so your, your idea is start with the couple and their expert, not, not even expectations, what they want.

Roan: And I think the, you know, part of what they've got to begin to work on Facebook aware of is just their own lack of boundaries because these family dynamics and these emotional entanglements with our families of origin, or one of the things that we'll say can marriage faster than anything else.

Craig: All right, Roan, you used a couple of counseling words and I, the last time you guys were on the show, which I hope our listeners will go back and listen to, because it is really one of our most popular two episodes where the episodes that we did with Ronan Eva in season one. So, go back and, and put a star on that, on your iTunes, on your Spotify account to go back and listen to. But I remembered it that I asked Eva last time, what are boundaries? And so you use two words in those thoughts, you use boundaries and family of origin. So can you expand on that little bit? What are boundaries? How would you define boundaries?

Roan: Oh yeah, certainly, uh, boundaries. So often I had, again, one time that I was working with him around boundaries and, and he came back and Eva had been meeting with his wife and started talking

about these barriers, these, these barriers that his wife had put up. And I was like, like, she worked for the highway department and she didn't,

Craig: I think about sandbags, she's putting sand bags around yourselves.

Roan: I wasn't sure, but, but he was talking about the boundaries and, uh, and, and that's a little off because boundaries are really not, not about setting boundaries whatsoever. Like I'm going to set a boundary on another person. Boundaries are simply about my own values and my own integrity, the things, what I will do, what I will not do, things that I will accept and things that I will not accept. And then I'm going to live out my life from my values and my integrity in simple things. Like if I'm in a conversation with somebody, anybody, and they start cussing me out or, you know, shaming me or blaming me, you know, I'll just go that conversation's over. I'm not going to participate in. That's just something I will not accept. And man, that's, uh, that's kind of the idea of even values, clarification, uh, beginning to even figure out who you are.

Craig: So what I heard you say was boundaries and 10,000 foot view is not allowing the merger of another person's identity to be crossover with your identity. I am my own individual person with my own thoughts and feelings. And those aren't maybe sometimes on occasion, they merged because we just share the same values, but I stand alone without someone else.

Roan: Oh yeah. Uh, it's really kind of where I end and you begin. And we have to really begin to figure that out.

Craig: And I don't remember who said it, but it's the idea that stuck with me the best is the idea of I have a yard, my yards, my yard, and I'm going to cut my grass and I might have Azalea bushes. And I might like to put out pine straw, but my neighbor, they might go with a more natural look and they don't like to cut their grass. And maybe they like to put, you know, bicycles laying around in their yard. Well, that's, that's your yard. It's none of my business. My job is to deal with my yard. And that's how I think of boundaries. I have everybody has a yard and you take care of your own yard and somebody else's yard. Is there a business, not yours?

Roan: And if they come starting to throw bicycles over into your yard, that's just something that you will not accept.

Craig: I get out of my yard.

Roan: Yeah, exactly

Matt: Correct me. If I'm wrong, boundaries are really something that, that already exists within a person. It's not about creating the boundaries. It is identifying them and then marking them for other people, voicing them using your, you know, your yard analogy. If there's no identification of where your property ends and where mine begins, you can't really blame somebody for Tulsa in their bike over onto your side. If, if they didn't know that that's where the property lines, but it's not about going out and saying, you know what, I'm deciding that this is my property. It was already there. It's just identifying it, marking it, and then choosing to not allow people to, to violin.

Craig: The other thing you said, Roan was a family of origin and this idea of, of where we came from. And it seems that it's more difficult to establish those boundaries, especially around the holidays with our families of origin. Why is that?

Roan: Well, the chances are, if maybe somehow, you know, the light bulbs going off for you and you've gotten engaged in your own growth process, and you're kind of beginning to figure out, you know, all this stuff that really makes life work boundaries and what it means to be a whole healthy, emotionally healthy, spiritually healthy, mentally healthy human being. Chances are your family. When you go back home, they probably haven't begun to do that work. And so they're just still the broken, dysfunctional people that they've always been. And when we get back into that family system, I know for me, just personally, as I began to do my work and Eva and I would come back to Mississippi, we lived in Atlanta for lone time and we would come back home to Mississippi. Boy, I would just get sucked right back into the role in the family drama. I played the role of the lost child. I had two older brothers, and then we get back in that environment. I was just right back into the loss.

Eva: Yes. And I could see it. I saw it. I'm the first born in my family of origin. So, I played the hero role and it really would, it would take him out that week in between Christmas and new years. Over time, we would come up with a plan. We would have time limits of when we were going to stay, because it really did. It affected him greatly. You know, where we both got to was that, you know, because we do, we can offer grace to our families of origin, they and understand they haven't always done the work. They don't really get, uh, what you know, and that's the hard part. I'll tell you, that's the downside of recovery because now you have all this awareness and they don't. Well, you know, we begin to accept people where they are and trust and turn them over to the will of God and trust that it's going to work out at the same time, maintaining our boundaries and maintaining our plan. We become a team of two in how we do life together.

Craig: So what I'm hearing you say, Eva is the holidays are a time when people are thrown into their family of origin and they revert to whatever role it was that they played as a child, as a teenager. I did want to ask you two things. One is you use the, the idea of hero and the other is that you use the idea of loss child can for our listeners. Can you explain actually for me, can you explain that?

Eva: Okay. So the hero is, um, the person who is out to save the family name, make the family look good. They're really good at denial and minimizing. They love to rescue people. Um, so they'll enable some bad behavior in our Christianity. Sometimes it looks so Christ's like, however, it's really enabling others behavior.

Roan: Yeah. Yeah. It's like, you know, every family is really like, kinda like a bad play. I mean, it's a family drama, right? And so everybody in that drama, or if you're in a play, you get a role. And, and this is the way family systems work in order to make the system work, you've got to play your role. And there's lots of different roles in the family drama, you know, we mentioned last child and hero, there's, there's the st you know, that's the one that, you know, they asked the blessing, there's the scapegoat. They get blamed for everything bad. Usually they're the ones that are carrying the pain and the family and all the

band stuff just gets put on them. There's the mascot that kind of the funny one makes everybody laugh and that breaks the tension. And so even, it's like, you began to see how this stuff plays out

Eva: and you may play multiple roles.

Roan: It's not always that you were just this one.

Craig: I'm about to say, Roan, I couldn't imagine you not being the mascot.

Roan: Well, truly, as you know, me, and as Eva said, you know, I, you know, I'm not really quiet. Um, and I like to talk and I like to be around people, but it's so interesting. We'd come back, you know, come back home. And then I would just kind of go back into that because, you know, my two older brothers, my oldest brother was, you know, larger than life. And he, he's the one that got all the attention and, and middle brother was just kind of wild bill in, he got his attention that way. And I was just third born, same sex, male child, parents divorced when I was eight. And so I was just kinda like where's Waldo. And when we would come back home, man, we just all played our roles out,

Craig: Lost child, meaning that lost your identity, lost your childhood.

Roan: It's just really not noticed.

Craig: Just not there.

Roan: Yeah. Yeah. Where's Waldo. I mean, I, I think when I went off to college, um, I don't think they knew I was gone for, I don't know, at least maybe a month, maybe. Yeah. A couple months.

Craig: What happens then is we grow out of, or I'm asking, do we grow out of these roles? We establish our own family dynamic or own family tradition, but one of the challenging aspects of the holidays is that when we are back with our family of origin, we were vert back to that role. And then all of a sudden our spouse is like, who the heck is this person that I'm with?

Eva: I could see Roan becoming the lost child. I could see it. He would get really quiet. He would get, he would go with, you know, inward, and that's not who he is, you know, I'm that way, right in that, in that family system, that's who he would become. And so me being the, in my unhealthy place, uh, that role of hero, I'm trying to get him to come back towards me, getting him to come back towards, uh, interacting with our family.

Matt: But you know, it's not, I think the way we've been talking about it is, you know, these different roles that the, the, the individual reverts into that role. But it's not just that it's also that sometimes the family wants to force you back into that.

Roan: They have to,

Matt: or they expect it like, you're not the hero. It's like, well, wait, why, where where's the hero? Why we've got this problem. You're supposed to be fixing this and.

Craig: we've got our little show going on

Matt: and we need that character here, especially if you're trying to rebel against that or stay true to who you feel like you really are at the moment, you might want to say, you know what, I'm tired of solving. Everybody's problem. Know how about this year? Why don't I get to take a break?

Eva: The roles meet a need. So it's really cool,

Matt: Right. Playing the role. So it's not it, you know, talking about all that. It's not hard to see while this turns into such, you know, a disaster. And I think that, you know, some certain holiday movies are always really popular, you've got national Lampoon's Christmas vacation, stuff like that. I think it's because it highlights a lot of these things that we're talking about, and obviously in a comedic way, but you've got all these different people who play these different roles in their family, and they're all trying to create their version or their ex meet the expectation of, of the holidays. And of course not feel works because none of them are moving, you know, in sync. And, and it's funny to watch when you're seeing it happen to somebody else, but it is really difficult when you're experiencing it yourself.

Roan: And it's one of the reasons why when, when you began to do your work and you start to get healthy and you're, you're establishing, you know, your well bounded self. And then you go back into that system, uh, it's just probably going to everybody off. Uh, they're going to get angry because you're not, you're not complying. You are not doing what is expected. And that's why it's so hard when you start to get healthy, you need a lot of support and certainly, hopefully that's your spouse. Hopefully you've got a, I call it a seal team. Uh, for me, I have a seal team of guys and, and I, you know, I've had that in my life over the years of having, you know, other people that are moving in the same direction, that help kind of keep you on track.

Matt: Well, you know, and one thing I want to add when you mentioned earlier about the idea of talking things out ahead of time and making a plan is to do that well in advance, because I think that, well, number one, thanks, speed up towards the end of the year. And even if you're not intentionally waiting or delaying, it becomes much more stressful when you haven't made that plan and it's on top of you. And then all of a sudden people are asking you, well, Hey, when are y'all coming here or winter in it, it just makes that so much worse.

Eva: I love this statement. Children explain and adults inform. So as healthy adults, we are going to inform others of our plan and what we're going to do. Also encourage the couple, if they're trying to reconcile, or if they're working towards becoming more intimate in the relationship that at sometime during the holidays, they need at least a one overnight together where they can step out of the chaos and really connect with one another before they go back into it. It brings meaning to what they've, what, what the holidays really are about. And that is intimacy with oneself with God and with, with our marriage.

Craig: Eva, say that again. Cause, um, I want to make sure that our listeners hear that this, this idea of children explain and adults form. Could you spend a little more time talking about that?

Eva: Okay. So what I mean by that, um, like if, uh, if, if one of our parents were to call us and say, Hey, this is when we're having our Christmas lunch and everybody's coming well, children explain, would look like, uh, Hey, uh, well, let me talk to so-and-so let me talk to my partner and see if that works and we'll

make it work. We're going to make it work somehow. I don't know how we're going to do it. I think we already have a lunch then, but we're going to make, we'll do both. We'll make it work. Now I'm explaining, I'm not really informing, informing our parents. Like, ah, gosh, I hate that. That's not going to work for us. We've already committed to this.

Craig: What I'm hearing you say, it's all about sitting down with your partner and communicating about what it is that each of you want, um, during the holidays, Hey, I want to have some time one-on-one with you. Hey, I want to make sure that the kids, you know, that we get to go away with the kids for, for two days and certainly want to see your and want to see my family, but those are the other things are my priorities. And then as a couple coming together and, um, deciding what that's going to look like, and then that way you can, as an adult inform others of what the plans are that you had already made.

Roan: Well, and it's like, just going back to my example of like, you know, my family not planning, uh, and then my mother's expectation of like Christmas dinner or Thanksgiving. I mean, it doesn't matter. And this is something we deal with in the counseling office all the time. Uh, when I first began to tell her, no, I mean, no as a Holy word. And when I began to say, no, we're not doing that. And I think this is the biggest thing for so many, uh, is like, Oh man, we don't want to make mama, man. What if mama gets mad? And I got to the place in my journey and my growth just to be, well, I don't know. I guess she'll just get over it cause she's a grown woman. And I began to inform her of our plans and I would even say, Hey, if you want to make a plan, uh, for next year, uh, and you'd let me know, uh, you know, we're all in, but it never would happen. And so just being able to say no, uh, boy, that's a huge step. And even, you know, in Matthew, Jesus talks about this. He just talks about boundaries in our family system. When he says that he didn't come to make life cozy, he came to cut, make a sharp knife, cut between these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God because that's where our freedom lies is being able to say no to, uh, our crazy dysfunctional families.