Rebecca Daniel-Burke: This is Dr. Rebecca Daniel-Burke, your host for the American Counseling Association’s 2015 podcast series. Today, we are speaking with Dr. Susan Hammonds-White about Imago Relationship Therapy.

Dr. Hammonds-White received her doctorate from Vanderbilt University’s Human Development Counseling program. She has been in private practice in Nashville since 1989. She is a Certified Imago Relationship Therapist focusing on helping couples rediscover the joy of their relationship, and she is a level II certified EMDR therapist, with focus on childhood trauma. She also works with issues of disordered eating with focus on body acceptance and intuitive eating. She is the current president of the American Association of State Counseling Boards, and is the president of the Tennessee Health-Related Board for Professional Counselors.

Welcome, Dr. Hammonds-White.

Susan Hammonds-White: Thank you for having me, Rebecca.

Rebecca: Great. Well, let’s dive in to the questions. My first question is what is Imago Relationship Therapy, who started it, and when was it started?

Susan: Imago Relationship Therapy is a dialogical process that helps couples rediscover the connection that they have often lost in their ongoing relationships. It was started by Harville Hendrix and his wife Helen LaKelly Hunt, and it was started about 30 years ago and has been being developed through all that time.

Rebecca: Thirty years ago. It started with Harville Hendrix who had a couple of books that were very popular. What's the title of one of his books? I can’t remember.

Susan: Getting the Love You Want is the major one. Harville appeared on Oprah early on in his development of Imago, and I think Oprah chose him as one of the 25 best interviews or spots that she has done over all the years of her talk.

Rebecca: Yes, he’s amazing. What if somebody comes in to you as a client and the client says, “Tell me a little bit about what this therapy is about and tell me about how long it’ll take. Do I need to be in a couple all of this time?” What kind of questions would you answer?

Susan: As an individual if an individual came in?

Rebecca: Yes.

Susan: If an individual came in and they were in a coupleship, I would say to them this process really is focused on couples and it would be very helpful for your partner, your spouse, or whoever you’re with to come with you.
There is a way of working with Imago that is possible to work with an individual, and that’s the second book that he wrote which is Keeping the Love You Find and that’s focused on working with individuals. In my opinion, it works best when you are working together with a relational experience.

Rebecca: So it’s possible to work with. Let’s say somebody is in a couple and one person in a couple does not want to come in. One person could come in and work on the relationship although I’m sure it’s better for couples. Is that correct?

Susan: They could. I think that that’s really a challenge.

Rebecca: Yes. What’s the developmental journey that all relationships take and what can couples do when relationships hit the wall of a power struggle?

Susan: The developmental journey is one that we’ve understood as partly conscious and partly unconscious. When we first get together, we are drawn by all of the wonderful qualities that we see in the other person. We are madly in love, basically. It’s romantic love and romantic love is a thing that happens when we found the click that that person is the perfect Imago match for us. And we don’t know what an Imago match is but we know that when we’re with them, the birds sing and the clouds are not in the sky and everything is beautiful and all we want to do is to – we can’t wait until we’re with that person.

It’s just an indescribably delicious period of time in a couple’s life and it’s really a time of what we would call merger. It’s, “You like that kind of music? I can’t believe you like that music. That’s my favorite song, too.”

We’re looking at all of these ways that we meet and what’s going on at that time, Rebecca, is that we are under the influence of drugs because there are drugs that are pouring into our bodies that are activated by the presence of this beloved person. They are pheromones and peptides and the real struggle with them is that the more we’re with that person, the sooner they get used up. And when they get used up, all of that wonderful energy merger begins to shift into, “Well, you’re not quite what I expected. You see it that way?”

It’s really interesting to see it happen and really it’s a developmental process because what’s happening is that the individuality of each person is reasserting itself. We’ve been so focused on the merger and now we’re going through the, “But I’m still my own person.”
And what we unconsciously want is for the other person to come over into our world and do it the way we do it. And of course at the same time, our partner is saying, “No, no, no. You need to come into my world and do it the way I do it,” which is why we talk about the power struggle.

The second stage of relationship is always the power struggle. We see this in the groups, we see this with couples, we see it in families. It just happens if we hit that wall. All of this so far that I’m describing is unconscious. We don’t know that this is happening. All we know is all of a sudden, it doesn’t feel so good anymore.

**Rebecca:** What we know is maybe that we were in the pink cloud stage and everything was beautiful and suddenly, “I can’t believe he said this to me,” that kind of thing starts happening. It’s interesting.

**Susan:** And we get to point – this is really where couples end up saying, “Well, I married the wrong person,” or “You’re just not right for me.” So you break up and look for someone else and then you go through the same cycle because everybody is going to go through the falling in love and the power struggle.

I always think of people who have done serial monogamy. Think about Elizabeth Taylor, for example. I think she married seven times and I believe that every one of those times, she was looking for the pink cloud once again and then couldn’t find it so decided this isn’t the right one.

What we now know is that in order to get through to the conscious relationship, we have to first of all learn what these stages are and then when we go beyond into consciousness, what we’re doing is really recognizing that we’re two separate people, we do have similarities and differences but you’re never going to be totally unconditionally present in everything for me, just as I’m not going to be able to do that for you.

We move into this stage of awareness and consciousness. And then that’s where the Imago relationship word takes up because that’s where we start learning the skills of relationship.

**Rebecca:** Yes, you meet these people who’ve – somebody I know has been married four times and I think she's 39. I always wonder what is that about that this sounds like this is what it’s about, the pink cloud.

For example myself, I've been 34 years. I've only been married once. Does that mean we went through those stages? Did those stages probably happened even without us knowing it?
Susan: Very likely. This is what tends to happen with – there are three options when you hit the power struggle. One of them is you break up. Another one is that you settle; you say to yourselves well. “Okay, this is okay,” and you start living parallel lines where you get along, you’re okay, you don’t necessarily fight with each other. But you may have given up on what you really longed for which is that deep connection and deep understanding and passion that comes from a mature relationship.

There’s break up, there’s parallel lines, or the third option is become conscious and move in to consciousness and consciousness means you recognize that relationship is work, that when you have conflict, you're in a place of growth trying to happen in the relationship. And you learn the skills of conflict resolution and of how to keep your marriage or your partnership really alive and joyful, and that’s where the work that I do comes in.

Rebecca: Particularly the joyful part, a lot is – it's rare that you hear people talking about the joy of their relationship.

Susan: Yes.

Rebecca: Describe the concept of an Imago.

Susan: This to me is one of the ways in which Harville Hendrix work really differs from the way a lot of other marital therapies have developed. Imago is a Latin word that means image and what Harville really came to understand and has been able to teach is that all of us have an unconscious template on the inside that is created by the positive and the negative experiences that we had with the people we grew up with, with our primary caregivers. That can include mom, dad, grandparents, a significant helper in the family. There are a lot of people that contribute to the creation of an Imago.

But what we have with an Imago is I'm going to be attracted to these positive characteristics that I experience in you and I'm also going to be attracted unconsciously to some things that may be not so positive, but that I don't really know about until we have really gotten into the relationship because what will happen is in the power struggle. I'm going to provoke you or I'm going to project on to you or I'm actually going to have picked someone who has this combination of negative and positive experiences. And then I'm going to be frustrated and I'm going to struggle with him. And my partner is doing the exact same thing, only from the other direction.

We have this place on the inside of us that chooses a person who – let me give you an example from my own life. My husband is an absolutely wonderful guy that when I first was involved with him, one of the things I just loved about him was how careful he was and how protective he was, and he just was always making sure that things were safe.
And then as time went on into our relationship, all of a sudden that characteristic that I had loved in him, it turned on me and it started feeling to me like I was being held back and, "What do you mean? I'm a grown up. Of course, I'm going to put my seatbelt on." Having him have to sit in driveway and wait until the seatbelt was put on because that's was what he did.

Where does that come from in me, I was really attracted to someone who is really there, who is really present. And then later on, I was also angry at someone who thought that I couldn't do it myself. I could be a grown up. It came directly from my father.

**Rebecca:** You had some unfinished business that you were working on in this relationship.

**Susan:** Precisely. And that's what we believe in Imago is that the main job of our relationship is to help us finish our job and help us become the full and complete human beings that we are meant to be, and our partner holds the key to doing that.

**Rebecca:** And that may be why working with an individual is really hard to do.

**Susan:** It's very difficult. It really is.

**Rebecca:** What makes Imago Relationship Therapy different from other kinds of couple’s therapy?

**Susan:** Well, I think it's very specifically two things; one is the concept of the Imago. Imago Relationship Therapy puts together a number of different strands of psychotherapy. I think there's a behavioral component, there's a cognitive component, there's a psychodynamic component; and they are all important in the way that we think about relationships.

The other thing that I think is really central to the Imago process is the central tool which is the couples dialog, and the dialog that we teach couples to use is both in there's a way in which it is a dialog between the two people in the relationship. And it's also possible to be dialogical with yourself, have an intra-dialogical experience as well as an inter-dialogical experience.

One of the main differences between John Gottman’s work or Susan Johnson’s emotional focus therapy, it’s the use of the dialog and it's the centrality of the couple. We, as Imago therapists, try to stay out of the couple’s way. We teach them the process and then help them stay in the boat of the dialog rather than so much having the flow of the therapy session go from client to me or client to me as therapist. It's more partner to partner and I will help you, I will coach. You might want to try saying this or here's a possibility, but it’s very much staying in the boat of the relationship.
Rebecca: Can you give an example the intra?

Susan: Intra-dialogical?

Rebecca: Yes.

Susan: One of the ways to think about that is that we all have different parts of self. And I might be able to have a dialogical discussion with a part of me, maybe a part of me that's anxious.

Rebecca: Okay.

Susan: Most of us have anxious parts.

Rebecca: That's right.

Susan: And so I might actually sit down and say, "Okay, anxious part, I'd like to hear from you. What would you like to tell me?" And maybe that part will say, "Well, I'm only anxious because I'm trying to help you because I don't want you to get hurt."

And so I might then repeat and say, "Okay, so what I hear you saying is that what you're about is trying to help me. Is there more?" And I would wait and the other part might say, "Yes, there's more because you remember what it was like when we were little and it wasn't really safe for you to go into new places because you got so scared. I'm just really trying to make it better." Then I would repeat that back.

The main purpose of the intra-dialogical would be to get clearer information about different parts that normally you're thinking that they're being very helpful. That maybe at this point, at this time in your life, maybe you don't need that. That help as much, maybe you need something else but they don't know that.

Rebecca: It's reminding me a little bit of ego state therapy and Gestalt.

Susan: And IFS, internal family systems.

Rebecca: Yes.

Susan: Right.

Rebecca: Interesting how he's joined these various –

Susan: This is what I would call Imago 2.0. This is a really lovely, extra development that's happened, I think, in the last four or five years that is really exciting to me or us who do this work.
**Rebecca:** I think many of us who are counselors for many years like you and I are, we’ve heard about Imago in the last 10 years or so but many people are, "Oh, I wonder what that is." And then you go to the next page of the conference brochure. And so I think you’re going to be teaching a lot of people what Imago is about through this podcast.

**Susan:** Great. That makes me happy.

**Rebecca:** Absolutely. What is the goal of Imago Relationship Therapy?

**Susan:** I heard a wonderful member of the Imago faculty named Nedra Fetterman just recently. She came and did a wonderful workshop for us here in Nashville and also taught in Boca Raton, Florida recently. And I believe that her statement is the most succinct and the most, what's the right word, has the most clarity. Imago's goal is consciousness. It's consciousness on the part of both people and the couple. Consciousness of what's going on, what you're doing, what's going on in the inside.

It's not actually to save a marriage because some marriages are not going to end up being saved. That's just part of the reality but if two people can leave a relationship with a higher degree of consciousness about what brought them there, what were the things that stood in their way, what were the barriers, what were the good things; they stand a better chance of finding what they want in future.

**Rebecca:** The next question is a big one so take your time answering, but describe some of the important concepts used in Imago Relationship Therapy. For example, such things as caring behaviors, appreciations, re-romancing, relationship vision, and couple’s dialog.

**Susan:** Okay, great. I'm going to take those and put the first four in one category, the dialogue and its own category. The first four – caring behaviors, appreciations, re-romancing, and relationship vision – those are what I would put in the category of putting positive into the emotional bank account of the relationship. John Gottman gave us this wonderful picture of a relationship having an emotional bank account, and I think that that’s a real contribution that he has given to this work.

What we've learned from his research is that it takes five positives to outweigh one negative. If you have a blow up, if you have a struggle, if you have a difficult time, you got to have five positive experiences to outweigh that negative and gets yourself back on an even keel.

Some of the things that we use are things like, for example, caring behaviors. The recommendation of an Imago therapist is that each partner make a practice every day of doing a caring behavior.
**Rebecca:** What's an example of a caring behavior?

**Susan:** Well, a caring behavior might come from a list that you have had each couple develop, and the list would be – this is something that if you did this, it would be a sure fire winner because I would feel loved and cared for if you did this for me. And these are not like tickets to Rome. We're not talking about the giant things.

**Rebecca:** We're talking about cooking dinner maybe.

**Susan:** The little daily things. A caring behavior for me is if my husband brings me the perfect cup of coffee that has the right amount of cream and is in the cup that I love. If what it says is, “you thought about me, you know me, you’ve thought about something that you know is special to me.” That would be an example.

A caring behavior might be you gave me an unexpected kiss, a real kiss not a peck. They come from each person's experience. And you know, it is so interesting, Rebecca, one of the things that happens sometimes is that I will ask couples to make this list and some of them will say, "I don't know. I don't have any idea what would make me feel good or loved."

That's a signal that says we need to spend a little time with being curious about that. I wonder what that's about, that that's something that you don't know about yourself or that maybe you're so unable to know because you're afraid to ask.

**Rebecca:** It’s kind of sad but at the same time, you don’t know what you don’t know.

**Susan:** That's right. Caring behaviors and to do a caring because one of the things that that does is change your brain and we're going to talk about the brain, I hope, a little bit later but we are so good as human beings at focusing on the negative. And there are really good reasons for that because when the sabretooth tigers were after us, we have to be aware of all the danger possibilities.

But we're not so good at focusing on the positive. For doing things like caring behaviors reroutes the brain and gives us more of a pathway, a positive pathway that we can then develop. It's like exercising a muscle. We keep doing that. We're holding our partner in a positive light. It's hard to focus on all those criticisms when what we're really focusing on is, “I want to give her a gift. I want to give him a gift that would be just right. I want to really search out and figure what that is.”

**Rebecca:** It’s interesting that you brought up the sabretooth tiger so that we could see just how ancient some of these feelings might be.
Susan: It’s so deep. Yes, it is. Moving on to appreciations, that’s another suggestion that we make that people say to each other every day that they take time apart every day and say, “I want to give you an appreciation. Are you available?”

Number one, you ask for a time because if it’s in the middle of the soccer game or whatever, you’re probably not really available to hear, “I want to give you an appreciation, are you available?” “Yes, I'm available.” I really felt loved when you or I was so appreciative when you, and whatever that is. And then we teach the other person to say it back. “You really felt loved when I,” and you say whatever it was. And then that person says, “You’re welcome.”

It was a lovely gift. It was a special thing that they’re being appreciated for and once again, that’s about the neuropathways in the brain. We do that on a daily basis, we’re exercising that muscle, creating those neuropathways.

Rebecca: Reprogramming.

Susan: Reprogramming. And that takes us to re-romancing.

Rebecca: I like the sound of that, re-romancing. What is that?

Susan: That’s really neat, isn’t it?

Rebecca: Yes.

Susan: Most of the time in coupleships in the early days, it’s so easy to be playful and to laugh and to be sexual because those love drugs are just pouring through your system and it’s just easy. It’s spontaneous. And what we learned is that when those early days are over, it’s not so spontaneous anymore.

Rather than saying, “Oh, it should be spontaneous and if it’s not, something’s wrong.” What we instead say is, “We have to be intentional about romancing.” We have to find the things, look for the things that help our partner to feel sexy or feel attractive and do those things.

One of the things that we sometimes laugh about is that our guys sometimes really have a hard time with that, to stay at home, get good training in how it works.

There are actually books that are helpful that we tell people about; 101 Ways To Be Romantic is one of them that I think is – it’s 1001 Ways To Be Romantic and there are several. I’m not saying that that’s necessarily the best one. But there are guides that can help you with that. The only thing is not flowers.
Rebecca: Flowers is not the only thing but flowers are pretty darn nice.

Susan: Flowers are lovely. Not to say that they're not lovely; they are. And another thing that we really do say is that couples need to set aside time for romance. You can't depend on, "I'm in the mood." You have to say –

Rebecca: Because the other person might not be.

Susan: Right. And you just have to say, you make an agreement. “We're going to be romantic together whatever form that takes." It could be massage or whatever but it's a sacred time.

Rebecca: Do some couples talk about re-romancing in terms of their sexual lives or sexual behaviors.

Susan: Oh, yes. Because when people get really busy and really far apart from each other and are leaving those either in the midst of the power struggle or in the parallel lines, the focus on being sexual together can really diminish. It is important to really – I heard someone say one time that sex is only 5% of the relationship, but it’s an important 5%. It's bonding.

Rebecca: Absolutely. What about relationship vision?

Susan: The relationship vision is an exercise that we ask couples to undertake, and it really involves each person making a list of about 20 things that they believe are crucial for their relationship, and we ask them to write it in the present tense and as we.

For example, we have a regular and enjoyable sex life. We make decisions jointly. We are in agreement that we want to build a house on the lake, something like that. We ask them to do that separately and then to prioritize what they think are the most important. And then they get together with their partner and using the dialogue process which I'm going to talk about, they hash out. What is our vision? How do we see these things? It's like a mission statement for a relationship.

Rebecca: Yes. Can you give me an example of one?

Susan: Well, I gave you some of the – usually, they come out with five or ten things that they then put – they might write about as our mission statement and put it on the refrigerator or check back every – some people use that as a New Year's check-in. How are we doing with our vision?

Rebecca: Yes, I like that. Now to couple's dialogue.
Susan: The dialogue, it’s the wonderful process that is the central experience of this kind of couple’s work and we teach it and when we teach it, the first thing we say is this is a really different way of doing things because we’re not used to listening to each other this way.

Usually, when you’re talking about something that’s of importance to you and that maybe is a little controversial, more than likely what your partner is doing is over there thinking how can I tell you you’re wrong? How can I tell you that this is – no, that’s not right? That’s not the way it is. It’s really this way.

One of the first things that we do with the couple’s dialogue is we take that out of it so that only one person is talking and the other person is a mirror. All they do is mirror. The first step is asking for time, “I’d like to talk about X. When are you available?” And so you make an agreement about a good time. Can’t be in the middle of the soccer game or in the middle of whatever’s going on with the kids or whatever, so they make an agreement.

We also recommend that if it’s a topic that has some controversy or some disagreement, some conflict, that you make an agreement that you talk about it within 24 hours because that – otherwise, if you keep putting it off, it’s not going to get done.

Rebecca: Yes, and it’s going to get stronger.

Susan: And it’ll get worse, exactly. We use the metaphor of the rug, putting it under the rug. After a while, your rug is going to have a lot of lumps.

Rebecca: Right, you won’t be able to walk on it.

Susan: Right. The first step would be, “I’d like to have a dialogue about X. When are you available?” “Well, I happen to be available now.” The sender is the person who is going to talk about the topic and the receiver is the person who’s going to mirror. Really all they do, Rebecca, is just say, “so what I hear you saying is.” And then they say, “Did I get that?” And then they say, “Is there more?”

And you keep saying is there more until the other person has said what needs to be said about whatever it is. And then the receiver would say, “Basically what I’ve heard you say is,” and summarize it. And then it makes sense to me that this is your experience because I do interrupt you sometimes. Maybe they’re talking about how I feel when I get interrupted.

And I imagine that you feel about that pretty frustrated. Then you would switch, and then the other person would have the opportunity to talk about their experience of whatever this issue is and go through those same steps.
This is not a way to solve a problem. This is a way to go deeper into an understanding of what each person’s experience is. And often when I'm teaching this, Rebecca, what I will do is I have some models of the brain in my office and one of them has lots of colors and the other one doesn’t, so they're different brains. I will give each person a brain to hold and we'll say, "Okay, your brain is different from his brain."

Rebecca: I like the idea of holding the brain, yes.

Susan: Because we forget. What we tend to think is that people see the world the way we see it and we don’t. We see it very differently.

Rebecca: Yes. One of the things with couple’s dialogue that I think is very difficult is when one person is trying to explain how they’re feeling and the other person really can’t listen and the reason they can’t listen is because they're thinking about how they’re going to respond.

Susan: Precisely.

Rebecca: Yes, what the person is saying is incorrect and wanting to correct them and unable to listen therefore.

Susan: Right. And one of the things that we do teach is how important it is to breathe in the beginning, to center yourself with breath. Three good centering breaths to begin with will help you stay out of that defensive place.

Rebecca: Yes. Oh, that’s a good idea. That’s being mindful and having some breathing.

Susan: But it’s a process and people tell me in the beginning, “This is so long and it’s awkward.” But if they stick with it and really, really take it in and start practicing it, it makes such a difference. It’s a wonderful process and people use it to deal with conflict. You can use it when you're in the middle of a conflict, when you’re elevated and angry and in the grip of reactivity.

Rebecca: Talk about the brain and Imago Relationship Therapy. You've mentioned it before but what does that mean to have a flipped lid, for example.

Susan: If you can imagine, hold up your hand and make a fist. The bottom part where your wrist is, that’s called the reptilian brain. It’s the brainstem. The only thing that a reptilian brain knows about is danger and if I am in my reptilian brain, all I can think about is something’s really wrong.
If you go on up and look at your thumb that’s covered over by your fingers and the mid part that’s covered over, that’s the mammalian brain; the brain of feelings that all mammals share. That brain is the brain that knows about fight or flight. I will fight, I will fly away, I will submit, I will change colors in order to be safe. It’s all about safety.

If I'm in a place of being – I'm angry or I'm scared or I'm hurt, if you take your fingers and put them straight up, your lid is flipped because those fingers are your prefrontal cortex. And of course your prefrontal cortex which is the part of the brain that evolved later in the evolutionary process is the part that can think, that has judgment, that has ideas of the future and the past.

And when your lid is flipped, your fingers are up, all you are is dealing with your mammalian and your reptilian brains, and you can’t hear another person’s understanding of things. The mammalian brain, the reptilian brain only has the present. It doesn’t have the future or the past. All it knows is I'm not safe and something’s really wrong. In order to be able to have a dialogue for example, you have to wait until the lid is on which is why you say, “When are you available? Let’s make an appointment.”

Rebecca: That makes a lot of sense. Talk about the importance of intentionality and Imago Relationship Therapy.

Susan: Intention is a big word in Imago because remember we talked about the two unconscious stages of the developmental process, the romantic and the power struggle. Once you move into awareness, what you’re doing is doing things with intention and you're doing things consciously. So I am going to intentionally choose to do appreciations. I'm going to intentionally choose to do caring behaviors. I'm going to intentionally choose to work on my relationship. I'm doing this with consciousness. I'm not depending on how I feel. We say that word a lot.

Rebecca: Intentionality.

Susan: Right.

Rebecca: Give me an example of somebody who has a problem with intentionality when you're working with them in Imago.

Susan: The people that I see that have trouble with that are often the ones who haven’t gotten that – they still believe in the romantic ideal. It should be so easy and if it’s not easy, then I've just chosen the wrong person.

Rebecca: Then maybe we should just move on to someone else.

Susan: Exactly. They don't want to see what they are not able to see that a relationship is always going to be an ongoing and evolving thing that you need to work on.
Rebecca: What about sex?

Susan: Well, we talked a little bit about sex before. Sex is a really important part of a relationship. However, it’s not the totality of it. We do recommend as one of the three things that couples do is that couples need to set aside a weekly time that they both agreed on in which they agree that they going to be physical in some way.

It doesn’t necessarily have to be intercourse, but it does need to be an agreement that they both keep. The idea of “Not tonight, dear. I have a headache.” Even if you had a headache, even if you’re not inclined, you go ahead because it’s often the case that if you do go ahead, you're going to find yourself feeling a lot of pleasure.

Rebecca: It’s almost like the Adlerian concept of act as if. Act as if you're enjoying it and you’ll actually probably will enjoy it.

Susan: Right, because bodies like to experience sexual experience.

Rebecca: Right, like to be touched. Yes, all of that’s important. What if you're working with a couple, and they have very different ideas. Let’s just give an example of let’s say it’s a heterosexual couple and the man wants to have sex once a week and the woman wants to have sex twice a week. How do you work with that?

Susan: Well, I would say the once a week is the bottom line and beyond that, they really have to negotiate it. It could be they have sex twice a week one week and once a week the next or one or the other of them. It depends on what they really want, Rebecca, if one of them really wants intercourse every single time or if there’s a way that there could be a mutual agreement for a different kind of stimulation. I don’t know what that would be.

Some of it depends on what the partner is wanting from that experience. Do I want to be sexual twice a week because when I'm sexual, it’s the only way that I really feel close to you or is it that –

Rebecca: A release of tension sometimes.

Susan: A release of tension at times or it could – depends on what they want from each other. Now there is a wonderful woman, an Imago relationship therapist too, has written extensively about this – Tammy Nelson. She has a book called Getting the Sex You Want.

Rebecca: And we will put those references to the few books you’ve mentioned on the podcast page. She’s written Getting the Sex You Want, and she is an Imago therapist. And so tell me a little about that book.
Susan: Well, it just goes through a lot of the things that we need to really be talking to each other about. The most amazing things about sex and relationships is that people don’t talk.

Rebecca: Yes, that’s right.

Susan: Couples often have a belief that their partner ought to know X, Y, or Z, whatever that might be and if I have to tell them it doesn’t count.

Rebecca: Yes, or some kind of magical thinking like, “We had sex everyday when we met. What happened?”

Susan: Right, exactly. And so she really encourages, and she has wonderful dialogue examples to help people really move into talking about what they really want in sex. And she also has a couple of chapters at the end of the book about that’s really good information about male sexuality and female sexuality. It’s a really good reference.

Rebecca: Good. What are three things that couples can do to keep their relationship strong?

Susan: These are the three things that we recommend. One is have a date night for sure once a week. Be sure that you do something as a couple, not with your family, not with other couples, something for the two of you, just the two of you. It doesn’t have to be fancy. It could be going to the neighborhood park and taking a walk.

Rebecca: Right, it doesn’t have to cost a lot.

Susan: Exactly. But a regular protected time for your coupleship that the message is my coupleship matters. We want to put this ahead of other things. That’s one. The second one is we already talked about, making sure that you have a protected time for physical connection. The third one is make sure that you have protected time for a regular weekly dialogue.

Rebecca: And could it just be a check in?

Susan: As far as the dialogue goes, yes it could be. The topic could be I want to talk to you about all the things that happened in work this week that were hard for me or the triumphs that I had or whatever it might be. What those have in common, Rebecca, is they are protected time for the coupleship.

Rebecca: I like the term protected time. That’s an Imago term that I think is really important. This is our last question and this has been so interesting. I really appreciate you talking with us today, and you will reach lots of people. Here’s the last question:
ACA now has over 55,000 members, most of whom are clinicians. Is there anything I have not asked you that you want our members to know?

Susan: Well, I would love for them to know that Imago is a really wonderful process, that there are great teachers out there that will help them learn the process and particular for our younger clinicians who are coming along. This is a wonderful way of working with couples that helps them grow and change and get stronger.

Rebecca: It’s hopeful, isn’t it?

Susan: Yes. It’s wonderful. It’s a wonderful process. It’s certainly changed my relationship over the years and if it did nothing else, it would be worth it for that. What I get out of this, Rebecca, is that I get to see couples grow and change and get stronger and happier.

Rebecca: That’s fantastic.

Susan: That’s a wonderful thing.

Rebecca: And I liked how positive it is. I know this has happened to you because it’s happened to me as a therapist. People have come in and said, I think we’re getting divorced. This is our last ditch effort. We want to say that we’ve been to couple’s counseling so we’re doing this, but we’re pretty much going to get divorced. How do you work with Imago with a couple like that?

Susan: Well, we say, “You know, that’s your choice and you may do that. I think there are some things that you could do before you go there that might make a difference and you have to decide whether you’re willing to put your decision off for six months and do this work for a while and see what happens.

Rebecca: Yes, that’s a good way to put here because it sounds very non-judgmental and engaging and hopeful.

Susan: And when there are children, I really always emphasize to couples if you possibly can, give this a chance because your children will thank you.

Rebecca: Definitely. When I was a very young counselor, I was working in a college counseling center on a campus. We had an intake form that was specific to that college counseling center, and we ask some questions. One of the questions was what is the most difficult thing that’s happened to you in your life, and I cannot tell you how many college age students – now, we’re talking about high functioning people because they’re in college – said, “When my parents got divorced,” and it didn’t matter when it was and it didn’t matter if they were three or they were 21. It was the trauma of their life.
Susan: And the sad thing about that was that 50% of first marriages still end in divorce. I think the 63%, I believe of the second, 78% of third. People don’t get better unless they get help.

Rebecca: Yes, absolutely. And is there a site I’m aware that tells us who is an Imago trained therapist in our area. We’ll put that on the podcast page as well so our listeners can see it there.

Anyway, thank you so much Dr. Susan Hammonds-White for joining us today to discuss Imago Relationship Therapy.

Susan: My pleasure. Thank you, Rebecca.

Rebecca: To view the links to this program or to write to the presenter or the host, please go to www.counseling.org and click on the podcast page. This is Dr. Rebecca Daniel-Burke, your host for the ACA 2015 podcast series signing off.