

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



When He Won't Go to Marriage Counseling

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and health marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is being brought to you by Rosen Law Firm. For more information visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen:

This is Stay Happily Married for February the 18th, 2008. I'm your host, Lee Rosen. Welcome to the show.

Today's topic is, "What to do when he won't go to marriage counseling." Now, I say "he." It's not always he. It could be "she," but as we're going to learn, more often than not he is the one that doesn't want to go, and so often she is wondering what to do about it. Today we're going to find out.

We have with us an expert, a psychologist who has been practicing for nearly three decades. His name is Dr. Michael Hall. Dr. Hall practices in Charlotte, North Carolina, and he is a nationally recognized expert on dual career couple issues. He's been dealing with couples for a long, long time, and he does amazing things to save marriages, and so we're going to talk to Dr. Hall about just what approach works and what doesn't work in getting your spouse to go to the marriage counselor so that some real work can be done to make the marriage work.

Welcome, Michael. It's good to have you with us.

Dr. Michael Hall:

Well, thank you, Lee. I'm excited to participate and to really encourage both from the community who are hurting and who are looking to improve their marital situation.

Lee Rosen: Well, so many people who are visiting stayhappilymarried.com. They want to save the marriage, but I think for a lot of them it feels like it's very much a one-sided deal. They see the problem and they have ideas about solutions, but, their spouse is not interested in doing much about that. Has that been something -- do you see that happen a lot?

Dr. Michael Hall: Yes, I really do as much from people who inquire about the availability of marital enrichment or marital counseling as well as those who are ready to go and want to make a first appointment. So yeah, that is a very common experience that one person of a couple will be ready for improvements and someone to assist with that, then the other who may be at a different point on the continuum of feeling the pain and what they're ready to do or not do.

Lee Rosen: So they're having this conversation where one spouse says, "Hey, let's go see a counselor. We really need to make this thing better," and the other one simply says, "I'm not interested. I don't want to do it"?

Dr. Michael Hall: Yeah, they appear to be shut down, just closed to that as an option. Absolutely. Absolutely, not infrequent of an occurrence at all.

Lee Rosen: Is it that almost the majority of couples, or do a lot of couples look at it and say, "Hey, let's go work on this together," or is there always more often than not resistance from one party?

Dr. Michael Hall: That's difficult to say. Based on my practice in terms of inquiries, I'd say that it is fairly evenly split. It may be a 60/40 one direction or the other, but it's fairly close based on, again, just the inquiries where people are calling. Either one or both parties are ready to go and the other is willing to attend or the reverse where one party is ready to go and they are -- have questions about what can be done to pull the other person in.

Lee Rosen: So if I'm in that situation and I don't know what to do, and obviously you and I are going to work through some ideas here about what somebody can do to get their spouse to come, but should I come anyway? Should I make an appointment and start coming and seeing a psychologist or a counselor even if I can't get my spouse to come?

Dr. Michael Hall: The answer to that is an easy and unequivocal yes. One of the misperceptions is that you can't engage in couple's counseling unless a couple appear, and it is possible to work on the marriage as a single individual. Now the real bonus -- and if you're with a good clinician they won't charge you extra for this -- is when one party

starts it's also not uncommon that the reluctant spouse will either join or decide that they will go off and work independently with a different clinician. So that's a kind of an extra bonus that's not very well known but is a common experience for clinicians and people who are deciding that, "Well, I will do what I can do from my end of the boat," as it were.

Lee Rosen: So progress -- you may very well be able to save the marriage hopefully even if your spouse never comes. That's at least within the realm of possibilities?

Dr. Michael Hall: Two things, absolutely yes, you may save the marriage, and then number two -- well, actually number one. I'd say that's number two -- and number one is, even if the marriage is not ideal, the benefit from the counseling -- it can be to determine what's reasonable in terms of expectations for self-change and then to make a determination inside of the safety of a counseling relationship of "Can I live with my spouse if she or he doesn't change or if they change a little bit in response to my change?" So both kinds of determinations can be made, again, inside of the safety of a counseling relationship. So saving the marriage, yes, and then if not, then what are you willing to live with and what would be a point at which you will make a different decisions about the long-term vitality of the marriage?

Lee Rosen: Now, I'm assuming, being a guy, that it's usually guys -- the men that don't want to come and that it's the women who do want to come. Is that typical?

Dr. Michael Hall: That's typical in terms of those who will contact me and contact professionals that I've heard from. That is true, and the reason I couch it that way is that may be in fact the perception, but it may not be the reality. By that I mean that it may be that those who inquire and report that "I'm willing to come, but my spouse isn't" may tip in the direction of wives who call and have reluctant husbands, and if the reverse is the true where the husband may be willing to come and the wife is reluctant, the husband may not call anyway to make an appointment. So that's why I'm couching it that it may be the perception that it's more likely to be the husband who's reluctant. So it may be the otherwise. We don't have really strong empirical or research data on that, but that is the experience of most.

Lee Rosen: I'm guessing you have seen a lot of wives try to get their husbands into marriage counseling and you've seen some approaches that don't work. What do people try most of the time that, what are

those things that they're giving it a shot and it's just not paying off for them?

Dr. Michael Hall: Two come to mind. One is the ultimatum.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: Where -- and a good way to understand that is that the pain is so severe and the list of failed attempts to improve have exactly that, failed; that in desperation a threat is made, well, we're on our way to the divorce lawyer or if you don't come in or do this or I'll take the children and we're out of here stage left. So some kind of an ultimatum in an attempt to move the person off over from being coerced --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: -- is certainly a frequent -- certainly a frequent ill-advised tactic.

Lee Rosen: We even see that in our practice where people say I'm going to hire a lawyer and that will scare them into coming to the -- going to a -- yeah.

Dr. Michael Hall: Exactly, scared -- yeah, that's right, to frighten the other person, and again, the good way to understand that is that it's an attempt to capture the attention of the reluctant spouse. So it's not all bad. It's just that it tends to backfire in that it pushes the other person and they just dig in further because it is often felt as a continuation of the tug-of-war that they've been unable to decrease or eliminate on their own. So even in the attempt of a solution it carries forth the same strategy that's been used unsuccessful, and that is "Well, I'll get you to do this, well, I won't give in if you do that or --"

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: "If you pull this hard, then I'm going to pull this hard," and so it then becomes a continuation of the battle that's going on in the relationship.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So the ultimatum doesn't work. What else? Was there another approach that doesn't work very often?

Dr. Michael Hall: Yes, and the other extreme in terms of the ultimatum that this is the end of the marriage or something that's really valuable to you, i.e. access to your children or access to some other valued aspect, financial resources or something. And the other is to beg and to plead.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: And again, we see more of a gender side here in terms of wives using that method on husbands, and again, that makes some sense in terms of a good look at how we have permitted each gender to have their own set of emotions that they can treat upon that we condone as a society. So women are, traditionally speaking, socialized and accepted to use tears or some would say the softer emotions to convey or to communicate feelings. Males in our society in particular are given the license to use and to trade on more assertive -- some would say aggressive means of communicating our pain or our needs or our wants. And so with that, then again similar methods may be used in the ploy to get the spouse to accompany and -- accompany and participate in marital counseling. So that other extreme doesn't work as well.

Lee Rosen: So you're -- so, okay. So you've now said ultimatums and threats don't work, and begging and pleading doesn't work. You've now exhausted everything I would have come up with, but what does work?

Dr. Michael Hall: Seriously. Actually, it came out earlier the -- and one of the best ways and most effective ways with one of your earlier questions, and that is should I go alone or not? Don't hesitate on that, and simply go and begin. What you'll hear repeatedly from both clinicians and people who research what goes on once the door closes and the individual and the couple are there will again share how again it is not uncommon that when improvements are made on one person's side, the other spouse will respond to come, whether it's out of curiosity or whether it's out of genuine sense of, "Well, some improvements can be experienced and I can have an improved marital relationship. Boy, if it's working and there's some change with my spouse changing, then maybe I'll get in there and see if I can encourage continued change on my spouse's part or maybe admit that I can change and contribute to our overall betterment as well." So that again is not an uncommon experience. So definitely begin and go yourself.

Lee Rosen: That's fantastic. So I don't need to present an ultimatum. I don't need to threaten. I don't need to beg. I don't need to plead. I just need to go.

Dr. Michael Hall: Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, corresponding to simply going can be to approach the spouse, one, in a way that's very different than previous attempts to improve the marriage, and by that I mean instead of going with a list of all of the promises broken, coerced in

the past, whatever it may be, but to go in with really a strong sense of humility. One of the things that's often robbed by the pain that gets pushed under the rug or ignored is the loss of the importance of humility, and then closely related to that is apology, and closely related to that is forgiveness.

So one of the ways to approach it would be to go in with an idea of, "I really want to start a new chapter in how we communicate, and I want to apologize for throwing my logs on the fire that's kind of burned and caused things to not be what either of us would want. One of the things that I'm going to invest in to improve is I want to have someone who can give an objective ear and eye to where we are and then make some pointed suggestions. And so I'm going to go and see a counselor, and I want to invite you to come and to join me in that." So that's a very effective way of not just simply going and then the other person sort of discovering it when the invoice comes or they're looking for you at a certain time --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: -- and you're not there because you're at a session.

Lee Rosen: That is fantastic. Well, it's funny because we started off headed in one direction and you made a turn there and gave us the secret to this thing, and obviously it's not going to work for everybody and I'm sure some people are too far gone, but gosh, it really makes it sound hopeful to me that we really can make our marriages work; if we know we can show up. We can sign up and go and visit with you or another psychologist, and if that's a positive step and it sounds like it is, then we really do have the ability to do something about our situation rather than getting involved in crazy arguments and fights and delivering ultimatums. We can actually do something that's going to make a difference in our marriages. That's very empowering.

Dr. Michael Hall: I believe so, and part of my commitment in terms of doing this -- psychologists and other clinicians often have the discussion around which types of individuals or life circumstance are most difficult to work with, and working with couples is very high on that list, but part of the call that I have is again recognizing the hope that is often submerged by the difficulty in getting started and the getting started being dependent on your spouse accompanying you when the "point of offense" or the "point of the pain" often has to do with not having a partner who you sort of can speak the same language or are willing to communicate and join in a mutual request. So if that's part of the presenting problem if you will or part of the challenge in the couple, then it makes sense that it's going to be

difficult to get them to agree to accompany you to marriage counseling; just like it's probably difficult to get them to agree to not do B for fun and recreational on Saturday night. Let's instead for the first time in X number of years, let's do C.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Michael Hall: Well, just like it would be difficult to do that, it's also can be difficult because that's where the relationship is. So yes, there is in fact something that can be done almost always. I remember they always say stay away from words like "never" and "always," but again in this case there is almost always something that can be done. It may not be ideal, the other person may not do anything, but the person who is willing to make some self-change often experience everything from relief to resignation that it is what it is to the point of making a decision that I can only be responsible for me. My partner who's not willing to recognize that she or he's a co-contributor to the absence of satisfaction and indeed fulfillment in our marriage, I can only do my part here. Therefore, if my partner won't move, then I will need to make a decision about the future of our relationship that may include separation and divorce.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm very hopeful because to go back, you said almost always there's something that can be done, and that's a very hopeful and optimistic viewpoint and to hear it come from a professional that deals with these issues all the time really is a very powerful and positive thing to hear.

I cannot thank you enough for being with us and giving us your advice, and I am confident that the tips you've given will help a lot of people bring their spouse to marriage counseling so that they can make things work. Thanks so much.

Dr. Michael Hall: You're very welcome.

Lee Rosen: I want you to know that you can learn more about Dr. Hall by reviewing his biography. I've put a link to it in the show notes for this program on stayhappilymarried.com, and you can locate Dr. Hall at his office in Charlotte, North Carolina. He can be reached by telephone at 704-858-2984. We would really like to hear from you in terms of your comments on this show. We have a comment line set up. Feel free to call in, 919-256-3083 or you can mail your comments to comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Join us next week right here at stayhappilymarried.com.

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