

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.



Achieving Balance: Individual vs. Couple

This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 12, "Achieving Balance: Individual vs. Couple."

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

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

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could be here.

I'm here with Dr. Dan Ryan. He's visiting with us in the studio. Dan is a licensed psychologist who has a private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. Dan has worked in the mental health field now in a variety of settings for 33 years, so he's got to know a heck of a lot after that much time in this field. Some of the things that Dan focuses on include consultation and counseling services for anxiety, relationship issues, substance abuse -- we talked about that I think last week or the week before. He works with stress-related disorders. The good news is he is happily married and is the father of two adult daughters.

Dan, how are you?

Dr. Dan Ryan: I'm fine, Lee. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: I'm so glad that you could be with us today. I'm curious, how long have you been married?

Dr. Dan Ryan: 32 years.

Lee Rosen: To one wife, one spouse.

Dr. Dan Ryan: That's right.

Lee Rosen: That's pretty good. We don't hear that a lot in our practice, as you can imagine. So you know that what we want to talk about is this whole topic of achieving balance. I am assuming that that means -- I see people that start dating, especially young people, and it feels like watching them that their relationship just sort of takes over both of them, that they almost lose their -- they almost look like one unit rather than two people. They're so excited, I guess, about the new relationship and all of that. Is that in the zone of what we're talking about?

Dr. Dan Ryan: What you just described is more like the early infatuation stages of a relationship where according to some authors that's a temporary loss of ego boundaries, which allows two people to become a unit. Yes, that certainly can become a problem if that leads the couple to a sense that this is nirvana and we need to stay here, because nobody stays there.

Lee Rosen: Well, what does it look like in a marriage when they're out of balance, when they haven't achieved balance? What kind of things go on in that couple?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Sometimes people who have entered a relationship by adjusting their usual approach to things have a major re-think later in the relationship, like they realize, "Oh, I used to have friends and a support system other than my spouse and I've lost that. I need to get back to that." And that's a major loss of part of who the individual was.

And sometimes that can come out in the form of anger at the spouse for "what I see you as having made me do," which is not my spouse's responsibility but it's mine for having made the decision to give up those things. So it's vital to maintain a balance of who I was before getting into this relationship, as well as developing the flexibility and adaptability to take on this new part of my identity as part of this intimate relationship.

Lee Rosen: You really do see people that just give up, I guess -- I mean, they just sort of give up their friends and maybe they leave their church and move to another one and they just sort of disconnect from the old them, I guess. Does that happen frequently, or are most people able to manage that well?

Dr. Dan Ryan: It happens frequently among the people that come to see me.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Dr. Dan Ryan: As a therapist who does a lot of couples work, that's a big part of what happens. There's a lot of resentment that can get built within an individual or within both individuals, and between the two of them in a relationship, if each person is not attending to his or her basic needs and isn't doing good self-care-taking. I like to use the term self-care-taking versus being selfish. Being selfish has a lot of negative connotations.

Self-care-taking is a very positive way to describe taking care of myself so that I can be a whole individual so that I can have a relationship with you. The relationships between two people who are not total individuals is more like an enmeshment. It's that unit that you described at the beginning. It's not having good, healthy emotional boundaries.

Lee Rosen: I get the sense that a lot of people do blame their significant other for being in this spot now where they don't have the life that they used to have. But is it possible that sometimes it really is the fault of one spouse who really does kind of cut their partner off from the rest of the world?

Dr. Dan Ryan: I always tell couples that I work with -- or even an individual who is struggling with relationship issues -- that you are exactly 50 percent of this relationship and your partner is 50 percent. The 50 percent that you bring is yours to work totally and you really need to be quite aware of what that is and be aware of your own needs and negotiate with your partner. Negotiation is crucial.

I often tell people that the only expectation that is healthy to have in a relationship is to be treated respectfully, and you can't even expect that if you're not giving it yourself.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Dan Ryan: So if I'm not treating my wife respectfully, I cannot expect her to treat me respectfully. But if I am doing so, I can expect that. Everything beyond that respectful treatment is about negotiation.

Lee Rosen: You know, just to give me some reference point -- and I don't know if there's an answer to this -- but what is normal in a relationship? How much separateness is supposed to be there and how much are you supposed to give up when you come together?

Dr. Dan Ryan: We can talk about normalcy from that angle that you're using, like how much is supposed to be there, and then my question is, who determines that; or we can talk about normal in the sense of

statistical -- the numbers. And I always tell people I'd rather talk about what's functional versus what's normal. It might be more normal to get divorce, as you are aware, than to stay married. If it's over 50 percent, that's more the norm. But you don't want to aim for that norm. You don't want to be normal in that sense. You want to be abnormal in that sense but be functional in the sense of having clear, healthy communication with your partner

I often use the analogy that the communication system in the relationship is the circulatory system of that relationship. And as you know, the circulatory system is vital and there's major problems if there's a blockage in that. If there's a blockage in the communication flow in the relationship, there's a major blockage there. I often tell people that what we're doing is emotional angioplasty.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's a good analogy. I like that. So what happens to a marriage -- I mean, you mentioned resentment. What do you see going on in a marriage when somebody gives too much of themselves up?

Dr. Dan Ryan: The one who gives too much of themselves up tends to become resentful. The one who's on the other end of the relationship tends to become entitled, like entitled to you giving yourself up for me. "After all, I deserve it." So that's where the sense of healthy narcissism is a concept that -- everybody has some degree of narcissism and there is healthy narcissism which is related to that self-care-taking we're talking about. There's pathological narcissism which goes way beyond that.

Lee Rosen: You're obviously the expert and you have all the science and the background in all this. I'm wondering what does it feel like in your marriage -- I hear resentment. I hear this sense of entitlement. Does this come on early in a marriage? Are the people you're saying in the first few years of the marriage or is this something that really doesn't get to the point of talking to you until much later in the marriage?

Dr. Dan Ryan: It can occur at any point in a marriage. Some people get there within the first year. It's more often the case that there are a number of years before it achieves some degree of acuteness that people say, "Yes, we are having a problem. We need to do something about it;" or even just to admit that they're having a problem, whether they agree to do anything about it or not.

It can also occur in marriages of a long duration. A typical case of that might be a couple who's raising kids and are in their work or

their professions and then when things change, the dynamics change in the family, there can be an upsetting of the equilibrium there and there's a whole adjustment that has to occur to adapt to the new realities.

Lee Rosen: Right. So big change can bring on these kinds of issues. I would imagine if somebody went from being in the workforce to being at home that they would feel a lot of loss of their own identify.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Absolutely. What we do is so much a part of our identity. I always say that the big three are what we do, what we think, and what we feel; and any one of those three is a significant chunk of who we are.

Lee Rosen: You know, listening to your answer it makes me wonder if when there's a big change -- like in my house, my wife was busy in school and working and that sort of thing and then left the workforce. And it seems like that might be kind of a triggering time where something like this -- where you could come into these issues later in the marriage when there's been a big change. Am I thinking correctly?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Yes, that is certainly true. And when we leave our jobs and come home, that's almost one-third of who we are in terms of what we do. The other two-thirds are what we feel and what we think.

One of the things that I often encounter is people using what an old colleague of mine used to call the Popeye defense, "I am what I am and that's all what I am" -- Popeye the sailor man. In other words, "This is me; take me or leave me." I often tell people that what really is called for is to change some aspects of some of what you're doing; that's changing some subsets of behavior. It's not changing how you feel or necessarily a lot of how you think. Some of that will change too, but changing parts of what we do is crucial for any of us to be able to meet our partners somewhere in the middle to achieve a consensus which is really coming up with something that we can both live with. It wouldn't be what I would choose if I were on my own. It wouldn't be what you would choose if you were on your own. But we're not on our own; we chose to be in this relationship so we need to reach that edge of the same page, that consensus.

Lee Rosen: Finding that balance. So what I'm wondering is, you're seeing people -- I mean, no one comes in and says, "We need to achieve balance. We have an individual vs. couple problem." They come in because one is mad at the other and this happened and there's a story. Maybe somebody was involved with somebody else or -- but if you look at the whole global -- all the people that come in to work

on their marriages, is this a problem in a large percentage of those situations? Give me a sense of that.

Dr. Dan Ryan: I think it is. It's in a vast majority of the situations even though, as you said, they don't come in saying, "We're having this problem with balance between my identity and who we are as a couple." It does happen more in the form of power struggles.

Any couple that is operating from a win-lose model of the relationship, it's a false win. You have to operate by a win-win model in my opinion, or else nobody wins. If I win temporarily, then chances are that there's resentment that's building and I'm going to lose in some way that I don't even see coming in the future.

Lee Rosen: So these folks that come in, does it take you a while to figure out that this is a big chunk of what's going on? Or, being an expert, does it just jump off the situation at you?

Dr. Dan Ryan: It depends on how open the people are in sharing what's really going on with them, and it's pretty typical that one is more open than the other.

Lee Rosen: You've got a guy like me who says, "I don't want to talk about it."

Dr. Dan Ryan: That's been known to happen, yeah.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Now, is it better when people are working on these things to be seeing you together, or do they need to come separately, or how does that work out?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Well, typically, if it's identified as an issue in the relationship I prefer to see people together from the beginning. That way nobody feels like they're getting a head start on it. There's another competitive dynamic that often occurs in relationships, whether people identify it as that or not, that as a partner I may not think, "Well, she saw him first so she got her foot in the door early and her perspective registered first." So this way it avoids that kind of dynamic.

And if it is workable to work with both people present, that's my preferred way of doing it. In some cases it's just not workable because there's just so much conflict that nothing is going to break the patterns they're into unless we do some more individually focused work.

Lee Rosen: Would it be fair to say -- in listening to you, my perception is that your belief is that the root of this is really in the person who let go of

themselves more than the person who made that person let go of themselves. It's all about you; is that really the key?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Well, you just used the phrase "the person that made them let go of themselves." I don't agree with that phrase because nobody makes anybody do anything unless there's some kind of blunt force or a gun involved.

Lee Rosen: Which sometimes happens.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Which sometimes does happen, yeah. Exactly. I'm not trying to rule that out. But in most cases people who say, "He or she made me do that," it really does get down to, "I felt too uncomfortable standing my ground and keeping my healthy emotional boundary to not go there," basically.

Lee Rosen: Right. You know, it's very interesting the little reference we just made to violent families. In many ways I feel like when I'm talking to people that are in violent families that they really have an extreme of letting go of themselves. When I'll talk to them about, for instance, dealing with child custody issues I'll say, "Who are your friends? We need to find people that can say nice things." And there will be none. And I will say, "Well, where do you go? Do you go to the PTA? Do you go to the church?" And they'll have none of that. They will have given up almost everything except for their life at home.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Isolation is a frequent phenomenon in a lot of relationships for each person. And in violent families sometimes I think it takes on very different appearances. A person who's more on the receiving end of the violence gets isolated because of threats that "if you do X, then I'm going to really hurt you," or worse. On the end of the one who's perpetrating the violence, that person gets isolated and retreats into violence as a way of trying to control some aspect of the world because of feeling pretty disempowered in many ways about things.

Lee Rosen: When you're helping people with these issues are you helping them to develop plans and strategies for going back out and re-building these pieces of their lives? Is there that practical component that goes on, aside from just sort of dealing with the emotional stuff, the part that's in your head?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Absolutely. If there's not some kind of a practical plan made for doing that, it's a nice concept. But the translation to reality is a little bit questionable. It's not a given that that translation will happen unless a person is helped with some focus on that.

Lee Rosen: Would I be right in thinking that literally some people -- you're sitting down talking about how do you get back out in the community, out in the world, meet more people, that kind of thing. Is that the practical sorts of things we're talking about?

Dr. Dan Ryan: That's often part of what we talk about, yes.

Lee Rosen: What else is there that's that very practical stuff that they're focusing on?

Dr. Dan Ryan: In terms of getting less isolated?

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Or just feeling like you're getting -- if you've been too like you're life is subsumed by being a part of this couple and you want to take it back, what do you do? How do you take it back?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Well, it's often helpful to ask people, "What did you ever do that you enjoyed, that you may have gotten so far away from that it's even hard to remember, but if you think you can really reconnect with that?" And getting back to doing some of that, that can be a very good anchoring or grounding experience.

But some people who tell me they don't recall ever having done anything that they've enjoyed, I invite them to speculate. "What might you enjoy doing?" It might not be something you enjoy doing, but if you don't let yourself meander around and you're thinking about it, you might never identify it.

And one example in my own life is I got interested in calligraphy and just got a book and taught myself some degree of doing that. I don't do it real well, but I've done it on occasion and it's a degree of artistic expression -- one of the few that I've ever done.

Lee Rosen: So it's like you own this thing again. It's something that just belongs to you that is not part of the marriage that is just kind of your thing.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Yes, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Very interesting.

Dr. Dan Ryan: On another very pragmatic level, something that's near and dear to my own heart is in the service of restoring one's personal energy. In my work I put out a lot of energy, as you can imagine, and I try to make it a daily thing at lunch time to get some degree of a power nap. On a good day I can do 20 minutes, and that's the maximum you want to do to be able to not go into deep, delta brainwave sleep and have a hard time coming out of it for the afternoon's work. But

if you can get any degree of anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes, for myself at least, that is restoring it for me.

For some people who are de-energized because of giving and giving and giving, I encourage them to do something like that and that can put you back in touch with yourself as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Now, when you see couples that are coming in and you identify this whole arena as their issue, are you able to help them? Any sense of batting average? If I walk in and this is the struggle that I'm facing, am I going to be able to save my marriage, or do I just need to pack my stuff now?

Dr. Dan Ryan: When people ask for any kind of prediction about what's the likelihood of this succeeding, I tell them that I'm really the coach on the sidelines. I can't run the plays for you. I can tell you some good ideas for plays and it's your job to execute them. I'm absolutely powerless over whether you will do it or not. So a lot of the answer to your question resides with you.

Lee Rosen: You know, one thing that occurs to me in listening to you about all of this is that this in a way feels kind of analogous to what you go through when you're dealing with kids all the time. I mean, it's almost like your kids take over your life. You talk about achieving balance, individual vs. couple; for me, anyway, it's like achieving balance, couple vs. kids. It's like, I know we can win this battle -- it'll end eventually.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Now, you have grown kids, but in your life did you feel like that was sort of a similar thing? You have to sort of rediscover yourself when they grow up and move off?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Well, hopefully one has maintained some degree of connection with oneself and it's not a major rediscovery. But for some people it is, yeah. So for some people, they have just totally gotten into that role and they wonder -- and a lot of people that have a problem with the empty nest have really given that up.

Lee Rosen: Have lost that, yeah. It's just a different thing has kind of taken over your life.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist for couples that seek help? Can they make it work? Do you see them make it work most of the time?

Dr. Dan Ryan: I believe that it is possible for most people -- unless they have just chosen so badly a partner -- that most people can make it work. But "work" is the key word. You have to work on it for it to work.

Lee Rosen: You can't just give us a pill and bing-bang-boom, we're all fixed up.

Dr. Dan Ryan: I wish I could, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. A hundred years from now they'll look back on all this work and -- "Oh, what was that about?"

Dan, are there other things that you feel like somebody that's struggling with this issue really needs to know? What else is important to them?

Dr. Dan Ryan: Well, I think it's important to acknowledge earlier versus later on in the process that there's something here that needs attention, and to start working on it sooner rather than later. The more emotional baggage we accumulate, the harder it is to offload it and to create new sets of baggage that are more positive.

Lee Rosen: You pile baggage on top of baggage on top of baggage.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Right. And I often tell people that, given that everybody has emotional baggage -- and every relationship does -- it is actually progress to not add to the baggage cart. That is part of this.

Lee Rosen: Right. Better than you were doing, right.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Exactly. And that's a big thing to do. It's hard for some people to put the brakes on.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I would imagine in your work that when you see people come in, in the first sessions they're sitting there giving each other the evil eye. And at some point later you see them walking out together and you can just tell from their body language that things are back on track. That must be an incredibly satisfying experience for you as the professional.

Dr. Dan Ryan: It is. And I try to not get overly focused on whether that happens because after many sessions they're leaving in not so good of a place because the hornet's nest has gotten stirred up. And I try to structure things and keep them in a positive, constructive mode, but I don't want to feel real bad when they leave and things are not looking good; so I don't want to get overly excited when they look like they're doing real well either.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's hard work you're doing, yeah. But it's important work. It's important work.

Dr. Dan Ryan: It's a narrow path I need to stay on so I don't fall off on either side.

Lee Rosen: Right. Got to maintain balance as the professional as well.

Dr. Dan Ryan: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, Dan, I very much appreciate you being here. And I feel like you've given people some good advice. I hope that you'll be able to join us again as we explore other topics, but thank you so much.

Dr. Dan Ryan: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: A special thank you to Dr. Dan Ryan for being with us today and to help us work through achieving balance, this whole idea of the individual vs. the couple. I wanted you to know that you can reach Dr. Ryan at his website, which is www.psychotherapyresources.com. And I will put a link to that in the show notes, of course, so that you can reach the website www.psychotherapyresources.com. And Dan has a page there if you put a [/ryan.htm](#) you will reach his particular page with his bio information and all that. But I'll put a link in the show notes so you can get there easily and not have to remember all of that.

I very much appreciate you joining us today. I think it's great that you're working to stay happily married. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we would love to hear your comments. If there's anything you'd like to tell us about this show or any of our shows, we have a listener comment line; the number is (919) 256-3083. Or feel free to e-mail comments to us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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