

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.



The Maturing of Love and Desire

This is Episode number 16 of Stay Happily Married, "The Maturing of Love and Desire."

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

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen; I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here in the studio with Debbie Neel, a licensed psychologist, certified health services provider, and certified sex therapist. Debbie specializes in both individual and couples therapy, as well as adult attention deficit disorder, and has a private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. Welcome to the show, Debbie.

Debbie Neel: Thanks.

Lee Rosen: I'm so glad that you could be with us today. You're an expert at all of these things related to marriage and being a certified sex therapist, and you've done this now for how many years?

Debbie Neel: I've been in private practice for over 25 years.

Lee Rosen: So you've seen it all.

Debbie Neel: Yes. I started out working mainly with children and families, and moved to couples, and in the last six or seven years have really focused on couples and marriage and sex therapy.

Lee Rosen: Now, I would imagine that in your practice you're seeing one person after another -- it's got to wear you out a little bit, just the never-ending issues that you deal with, yes?

Debbie Neel: Well, yes and no. I would say early on in those 25 years that it really would wear me out. And through the years, there's certainly common things; and I have an approach that we're all more normal than we are abnormal.

Lee Rosen: I hope.

Debbie Neel: Exactly. But people do come to therapists thinking that they're abnormal or dysfunctional. And there are common things and what I try to do is to help normalize life developmental stages both in love, marriage, raising children, and different life events -- aging parents.

Lee Rosen: Do you take a lot of your work home with you or are you able to sort of keep it out of your life?

Debbie Neel: Early on I probably took it home with me quite a bit. And it takes discipline to know how to get a balance in life and to give responsibility who come in my office. If they're coming to do the change themselves, then I'm just a guide, a coach to walk alongside them and it's their choice what they do with it.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's fascinating. Now, at home you have -- you're married, yes? And how many years?

Debbie Neel: Twenty-seven next month.

Lee Rosen: That's a long time. In this day and age 27 years is a huge amount of time. Children?

Debbie Neel: We have two children, 23 and 21.

Lee Rosen: Does helping people deal with all of their issues in their marriage help you to see your marriage? Does it make it easier knowing about all of this stuff?

Debbie Neel: Sometimes easier, sometimes harder.

Lee Rosen: Really? Yeah.

Debbie Neel: Yes. Because I am working in marriages and focusing on communication all day long. And, as we've talked other times, that there are some gender differences and that I may want my husband to be very emotionally connected and talkative in the evening to rehash emotional things. And men aren't quite as emotional as women, overall; that is a generality.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's interesting. Now, let me ask you -- let's kind of dig into this topic. Our topic today is the maturing of love and desire and so I'm curious, does love -- or I guess how you experience love -- does it change over the course of the marriage?

Debbie Neel: Oh, absolutely. You've been married quite a few years; I'm sure you experience changes as well. I think we enter marriage in very much a romantic state. It's very passionate, erotic; it's idealized; our focus is on all the wonderful things about the person.

When I'm doing workshops I often talk about we marry the front end of the puppy; they're so cute and we just want to take them home. And then after the honeymoon we find out that the puppy comes with a backend. And there's just a lot of other things that during dating and even the first few months or couple years of marriage, everything -- we can put our best foot forward.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I get the sense that as the backend emerges or as things looked a little bit different that some people don't see that -- we're using the word "maturing" of love. I get the sense that some people see that as the end of love, that they don't see that as -- they assume the change means maybe they weren't in love in the first place.

Debbie Neel: I think oftentimes that happens, that there is all this -- it's new and novel. Love tends to be passionate, sexual feelings tend to be very easy and erotic. In fact, our bodies release hormones that help in that bonding process, the oxytocin, for example.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Debbie Neel: And I refer to these easy hormones to help with emotional aspects of the relationship and connection and also in terms of sexual intimacy. And those hormones tend to decline anywhere in the first three to 24 months.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So it's a physiological process that we're --

Debbie Neel: It really is.

Lee Rosen: Very interesting.

Debbie Neel: And if people understand that biology then they're less likely to think, "Oh, well, I don't feel like having sex every night the way that I did when we first got married." That doesn't mean a lack of love, but it means it's time to mature. It's time to really embrace the total person.

Lee Rosen: Now, is that change in desire -- this whole hormonal thing -- is that -- would you say that that's the same for men and women, or does it happen differently, or what goes on there?

Debbie Neel: Yes and no. All those easy hormones always tend to -- as I always refer to them -- tend to be early on. But there are certainly gender differences. Men have 15 times the testosterone as women and testosterone is the hormone of desire.

So if I will speak in generalities, for example, I'm going to refer to men as the higher desire partner and women as the lower desire partner. That is not always the case and it is currently changing in our culture and our society with all the stress that men are under. But from a very basic biological point of view men have 10 to 15 times the testosterone that women have and testosterone is the hormone of desire.

Lee Rosen: Now, you said something interesting there that I wanted to ask. The bottom line answer to that question is, it is different for men and women, yes?

Debbie Neel: Well, it can be. Everything is going to subside because men are going to see their wives' flaws just as women are going to see their husbands' flaws. So all that being --

Lee Rosen: Just for the record, my wife has no flaws, I want to let you know. She listens to this.

Debbie Neel: Neither does my husband.

Lee Rosen: Right. We got that covered. Okay, go back to the stuff.

Debbie Neel: That when we stop putting our best foot forward and we get caught up in who's cooking dinner? Is it a two-career family? Are there children? Who's going to walk the dog? Who's taking out the garbage? We put all those things aside, really, when we're dating. The laundry can go and we'll just go out to dinner. Who's going to cook? Forget the dishes.

But then over 27 years, at least at my house, those things kind of mound up and we have to take care of them.

Lee Rosen: Right. The dishes pile up after 27 years.

Debbie Neel: So how do you get all that passion and eroticism in the midst of the cat throwing up and taking out the garbage and the kids crying in the middle of the night? And so what we tend to do, because we are

responsible people -- maybe not in the early stages of dating, but we do have to think about schedules and going to work and being there on time and be mindful of the family budget. Sex often becomes the last thing on the to-do list late at night.

So along with all that easiness of arousal, so to speak -- that easy eroticism that we have in romantic marriage -- as we move into this more mature marriage we can get caught up in this hum-drum and the routine versus viewing it as "this is my companion, my life partner;" because those feelings and thoughts in and of themselves can generate the eroticisms because we get to be with our best friend, someone who knows us in and out.

But 11:00 on Saturday night is the most common time, I hear, that there's going to be sexual activity. And if there's activity during the week there's -- well, is a child going to knock on the door? Or women in particular have difficulty -- it's good to multitask, but then it's difficult to let go of those distractions once in the bedroom.

Lee Rosen: I had a funny comment about Saturday night at 11:00 but let me not interrupt you. Let me let you keep going.

Debbie Neel: Well, as time goes and love changes and the desire changes -- and we will say in this example that men are the higher desire. Now, that is not always the case and I always hesitate saying that because there will be women that call me up after I speak someplace and say, "But I'm the higher desire partner," and that is increasing. So I'm going to stick with the stereotypic men being the higher desire.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Debbie Neel: They're more one-track-minded versus multitasking like women. So if you think about wives coming to the bedroom and they're thinking, "Okay, did everyone brush their teeth? Did the clothes make it to the drier or are they going to sour in the washing machine?" Husbands frequently are already in the bedroom thinking, "Okay, the day is over and now it's our time."

Lee Rosen: We're geared up; let's go.

Debbie Neel: And men tend to be more visual. Women tend to be more emotionally driven. And so it takes some time for the wife to get warmed up. Now, you're thinking of fatigue. Fatigue is one of the top reasons that decreases desire and that's why men's desire is declining, because of all the stressors that they have all day. So everyone is tired these days.

But sex can become obligatory, routine, mundane, lacking in variety. And because it doesn't have all that passion at the beginning and it's not given the attention that it needs, then it can feel like sexual attraction for one's partner has declined and that love has declined, when in fact it's that there really hadn't been appropriate, in my opinion, sex education.

People come in my office and I say, "Well, how did you get your sex education?" And it's usually fifth or sixth grade movie watchings and people know how to get sperm and egg together. They don't know how to get parts together.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's very interesting. I totally agree with you that we don't necessarily make the right connections. One thing will happen and we make assumptions about love based on sex. And I see people all the time that realize at some point that they've taken action about their marriage and then they realize, "Oh, gosh. I totally misread the situation." And then they have regrets about the fact that they separated or that they started a snowball rolling down a mountain that they feel like now they can't stop because they really misread the situation.

They didn't realize how much they would miss their spouse and how really connected they were because they thought this lack of sexual desire means lack of love and connection and didn't put together that it's the stress of life and the schedule and all the -- you talk about 11:00 Saturday night. It's like, I'm exhausted at 11:00.

Debbie Neel: And I wouldn't call it lack of desire. I would call it a change of what that desire is like.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay.

Debbie Neel: That instead of it being all hormonally driven, which so frequently is associated with romantic love, is that it's heart driven, it's relationally driven. It's, "You're my buddy. I want to close out the rest of the world and feel safe with you." And so we cognitively need to initiate sexual activity.

Lee Rosen: And see, you're very good at analyzing it and breaking it into its pieces and I'm the typical guy. It's like, boom, here's where I stand. You know, it's like -- so we're a dangerous thing because we take action and we think quickly and we don't really know what we're doing. All this stimulus results in a response that isn't necessarily the target. So I feel like you're helping us to slow down and think about what we're feeling and why we're feeling that way and what's really going on here.

Debbie Neel: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: And this whole idea that a little bit of it is physiological and, hey, you don't have these same hormones -- and you see the world a little differently when you don't have the stuff flushing through your body at quite the same rate. That really does help us to take a breath, I think, and analyze the mess that we're in -- if we feel like we're in a mess -- and maybe things aren't as difficult as we thought they were. Very interesting.

Debbie Neel: Men are very visually queued in. Frequently they -- well, once the husband and wife get in the bedroom and a husband may see his wife and immediately say, okay, and can block out the rest of the day. That's that one track. And you've got to give your wife time to cleanse her head. And, guys, the way to do that is to talk with her heart. You know, "How are you doing? How are you feeling?" Get her to focus on herself.

Sex is a very complex task, even though we don't talk about it that way. And the complexity is what each partner needs. That's not only their gender, but also their personality and then their stressors of the day.

Lee Rosen: So, okay, I have to revisit my whole approach.

Debbie Neel: Well, men think that they can -- for example, Mother's Day has recently passed. Maybe not in front of the kids, but maybe giving their wife a sexy nightie, that can feel like pressure to a woman because she's not visual. Men are giving themselves a present. "Wear this. You will look good. I will want you."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Debbie Neel: One of my favorite examples is I was working with a couple and they came in and we're talking about -- he wanted her to initiate sex. And if you think about testosterone being the hormone of desire, men are going to initiate more. Guys, get over it. That's just the way that it's going to be. And so I really do coach women to cognitively initiate because they're not going to have that sense of hunger inside that typically is associated with hormones.

But this husband was saying, "She just never initiates sex."

She turned and looked at him stunned and said, "Honey, I invited you to go to the museum with me just last week."

Lee Rosen: Oh, well, I can see why he was confused.

Debbie Neel: I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm female. I ought to get this." I looked at him and I said, "Did you get that one?"

He said, "No."

I said, "That went over my head, too, so I'm sure you didn't get it."

But if we appreciate that we're coming at it from different angles -- talk to me, hold my hand, light the candle at the dinner at home. You do not have to have a big fancy meal out.

Lee Rosen: Right. I think you're going to have to help us with -- we're going to have to put all this on a little card that the guys, we can all print it out and hold it in our hands at night and just do the checklist to make sure we're -- "ask her about her day."

Debbie Neel: And mean it.

Lee Rosen: And mean it, right; and mean it. Gosh, you're going to have to put that on the checklist, too.

Debbie Neel: Well, and I coach husbands and when they look at me like a gal at new game. And I say, "Well, ask your wife." And you guys just want to fix things. We want to emote -- "please don't talk; nod your head." Don't say anything; nod your head. Keep eye contact. Maybe touch our hand. And we will wander around and you -- half the time you won't know what we're saying really, or understand it, but that's okay; just be interested in us.

Lee Rosen: Okay. We'll add that one to the checklist.

Debbie Neel: We'll let you know when you need to stop and solve a problem.

Lee Rosen: Let me ask you this, just as an aside. How did you become so interested and involved and become an expert in this -- the whole sexual thing is -- I don't know how long something people have talked about. It does feel like in recent years it's really changed. But how did you stumble into this area of practice?

Debbie Neel: I was basically taught and trained, you know, if you talk with a couple and help them with their conflicts, negotiate their conflicts, improve communication, sex will follow; and had been going with that philosophy for many years of practice.

In 2001 I relocated my office to Atrium Ob/Gyn.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right here down the block in Raleigh.

Debbie Neel: So they had this introductory lunch for me to meet the staff and one of the doctors that I had not met before said, "Do you do sex therapy?"

I looked at him stunned and -- well, they should have asked me that before I moved in, but I said, "Gosh, I have teenage kids. No, I don't. And, gosh, sex is a nice memory." And really, it can become second to all these responsibilities.

Anyway, at that point in time I felt ethically that I needed to get specific training. We do go to workshops; I had done some sex therapy through the years but really not what might be required within the context of an Ob/Gyn office. There's just lots of physical issues that come --

Lee Rosen: Yeah, I would assume so.

Debbie Neel: So I started training -- very specific training -- in 2002; took graduate level courses, went through certification, supervised therapy, so that I could have a broader base about specific physical issues, for example, like I've been talking about today.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, has it become easier to talk to couples? Are people more comfortable talking about sexual issues today than they used to be?

Debbie Neel: Yes and no. We can tell jokes. We can laugh at T.V. shows, at the movies. And then when it comes to a couple talking about their individual or their couple relationship, that gets very scary for us. And I tell couples marriage takes a lot of courage. Sex and our sensuality, sexuality, is where we feel most fragile and most vulnerable; that when I tell my husband about myself and about myself sexually, I am really offering up to him a lot of power to hold over me, and vice versa. So when it comes to married couples talking about sex, they find it very difficult.

So who comes into my office is people who really can't talk about sex and it's much easier to point the blame at the other person. And because of gender differences -- to be stereotypical, frequently it's the husband pointing the finger at the wife. And just as I say that I'm thinking probably more of my couples right now the wife is pointing the finger at the husband. But we would rather point it away from ourselves than really understand ourselves, our

sexuality, our bodies, and it takes a lot of intimacy to be able to share that.

Lee Rosen: Yeah, difficult -- tricky subject to discuss at home. Especially, I think, if the relationship -- if problems built -- if you're really getting to a point in the relationship this becomes harder and harder and harder.

Debbie Neel: And sometimes the issues in the relationship start in the bedroom and sometimes those start outside of the bedroom. But what we find are the dynamics of communication are pretty much the same inside the bedroom and outside the bedroom, so that's why the focus really is about communication. It's about trust, laughter, playfulness and forgiveness.

Lee Rosen: Very good. Fascinating. What I'm wondering is, from a practical standpoint, I come into your office. My wife and I show up, we have issues with sex and our marriage and we need help. What's going to happen? What's the first issue that you as an expert are going to address? How are we going to work through this?

Debbie Neel: First of all, Lee, I'll say I'm sure you and your wife have had sexual problems because my husband and I have had sexual problems. The bottom line is, every single person does at some point in the marriage. And that's normal. So I really like to call it challenges instead of problems.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Debbie Neel: Okay. So we'll start there.

Lee Rosen: We've got a challenge.

Debbie Neel: Yeah. But if someone comes in, I'm going to meet with them as a couple first. Then I'm going to meet with each person individually one or two times and collect a sexual history. Unfortunately, very intrusive but I do ask people to let me come into their holy ground, their sacred ground, their private marriage -- only as far as I need to come and as briefly as possible -- to find out about their sexual training, their attitudes, their experiences, learn more about where their expectations have come from. And then I will meet back with the couple together and outline for them how I saw their issues begin, what's maintaining them, and develop with them a treatment plan.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Sounds like a good start. So you're going to get in there and right off the bat you're going to be talking about things, so you've

got to expect that. This is the time for laying it all on the table or you're not going to be able to get the help that we need when we come to see you.

Debbie Neel: And it's very awkward for people --

Lee Rosen: Oh, sure.

Debbie Neel: -- on the front end. And sometimes I look at them and say, "This is just as awkward for me. But if we say these words, we'll get comfortable with this." And certainly since I've been doing this five or six years now on a consistent basis -- pretty much my practice is sex therapy -- I have gotten more comfortable. And as I've gotten more comfortable, I can help couples feel more comfortable.

Lee Rosen: Now, when someone comes in to see you, do you know -- are you pretty optimistic that you're going to be able to help them work through these issues, or is it more like a 50/50 chance of success? Give me a sense. Is there much hope?

Debbie Neel: I'm an optimist. I'll just start there. When I've started doing workshops and some training of professionals is I found myself saying the same thing 8 to 10 hours every day. So I'm thinking, okay, there's something that we need to re-educate versus that there's a lot of pathology. Yes, I'm optimistic. It does require -- keep using the word forgiveness -- on the part of each mate that there has to be a commitment on their part.

They're going to feel awkward at times. They're going to feel uncomfortable at times. They're probably not going to want to do things at times -- that we move in increments that they can continually feel safe with themselves and with one another and keep stretching. I guess it could be a whole new program, sexual behaviors, but it's negotiating what each partner is comfortable with.

It's like you and your wife probably have favorite restaurants, one or two that are just really where you want to go. And then you like to try different restaurants, "Oh, we haven't done this in a while." And if you think about sexual behaviors and sexual rhythm of couples, that there's good tried and true and companionship, comfort, and great lovemaking; but then you also need a little variety.

So it's negotiating those things. And as couples understand that -- and one partner may like some things and maybe totally offensive to the other partner. We talk about those things to see which things

can be negotiated. But sex is not about techniques -- good sex, satisfying sex -- is not about techniques and not about doing all kinds -- every single behavior you've ever thought of.

Lee Rosen: Very, very helpful, I think. And a lot of marriages, obviously -- I guess every marriage, really -- you're saying it's normal to be dealing with sexual issues in a marriage. And I feel like you've given people some good advice and some good starting points for help. I really appreciate you joining us and offering the assistance that you've offered. Thank you very much.

Debbie Neel: Thank you for letting me be here.

Lee Rosen: Thank all of you for listening in, and a big special thank you to Dr. Debbie Neel for being here to share a little bit of her wisdom about love and desire over the course of the marriage. Really the long haul as love and the marriage matures.

If you would like more information about Dr. Debbie Neel, she has a website. It's atriumphspsychology.com. We will of course put a link in the show notes to that website. You can also call her office at (919) 781-8810.

Thank you so much for joining us and I hope you will join us again ext week. If you have comments, we would love to hear them. Please feel free to call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083, or shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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