

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.



## Another Happy Year

*This is Episode number 22 of Stay Happily Married, "Another Happy Year."*

*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 with Dr. Susan Orenstein, a licensed psychologist with a private practice in Cary, North Carolina and a newly opened location in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Now, for those of you that are not from North Carolina, you may not know much about Cary. Cary I think is really sort of a bedroom community of Raleigh, North Carolina; and Chapel Hill I'm sure you've heard of because of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And all of these towns surround the Research Triangle Park -- Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill -- and so in many respects we're all part of sort of one larger community with little towns all spread across this larger community.

Now, Dr. Orenstein conducts seminars in the Triangle on staying happily married; that's something she's done for some time and teaching people how to stay married. She's been married for 19 years herself, so anniversaries are nothing new and that's what we're going to focus on today.

Welcome to the show, Susan. We're glad you could be with us.

Susan Orenstein:

Glad to be here. Thank you.

Lee Rosen:

You know, I'm very excited to talk to you because I have an anniversary coming up. June 23rd will be my 18th wedding

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anniversary. My wife had our wedding date engraved on the inside of my wedding ring so I can always check it, just to be sure.

Susan Orenstein: Congratulations. You'll be legal.

Lee Rosen: That's right. Now, you've been married 19 years, so you were married in 1989, yes?

Susan Orenstein: That's right.

Lee Rosen: I was married in 1990, which also helps me because a nice round -- a 10-year I can remember more easily; I stay out of trouble. But I need to know -- I'm worried about this because the anniversary is coming up so I'd really like us to figure out how do we deal with these things and what's going on with them? So really just perfect timing for me.

Do you have a June anniversary or do you have a different month?

Susan Orenstein: Mine's Labor Day, so that's how I remember.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you just had your, right?

Susan Orenstein: Well, Labor Day -- no, that's --

Lee Rosen: Labor Day -- that was Memorial. So coming up in September, I guess?

Susan Orenstein: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you're gearing up for yours.

Susan Orenstein: I am.

Lee Rosen: Okay. It does seem like -- well, I know this is true -- June is the big wedding month. So we're right in the middle here of everybody having their anniversary. Last month I felt like if you went to a restaurant you were surrounded by teenagers having dinner with the prom, and now in June you're surrounded by all the couples doing the anniversary thing. So it's a big month for this; I'm glad we can talk about it today.

You have been on the program before and you've talked about the significance of holidays. We had a discussion a while back about Father's Day and I feel like in many ways some of the things we talked about with Father's Day really relate to dealing with -- I

guess holidays are holidays among families and you've got to figure out special ways to deal with them, yes?

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh, yes.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me ask you, one of the things that I worry about after having this many wedding anniversaries of my own -- and you're a year ahead of me -- is that it becomes nothing special, that we just do -- our anniversary will come up, I haven't reserved a restaurant or anything and I feel like we just kind of -- after 18 years we're like, "Oh, yeah. It's the anniversary. Happy Anniversary." Is that going to hurt us in the long run?

Susan Orenstein: I think it is really important to celebrate being married and really enjoying your relationship. And it can be that day of the anniversary, but it doesn't have to be. And I think since I am a marriage therapist it's particularly poignant to me, like I realize how vulnerable marriages are; so every year that we're still married and still very happy together I'm more grateful.

And so I think just having gratitude and pressing the pause button and saying, "Wow. We've made it through this and this," is very valuable if it's on that particular day or that season. So for me our anniversary is Labor Day. So it doesn't have to be that particular day, September 3rd, but it'll be Labor Day. Or sometimes we might even say, okay, we're going to celebrate in October because things are so booked. But I do think it's important to press pause and say "let's value what we have."

Lee Rosen: So in other words, if I don't get my rear end in gear, I'm doomed; and I accept that, so I'll get on the phone when we finish up here. And I know how to make reservations and plan events and all of that, so I can really turn on the gas. But don't you feel like -- my life, I'm guessing, is typical of most people's and we're running around, we're dealing with kids and schedules and work and everything else. Doesn't marriage sort of get left in the dust in the chaos of daily life today?

Susan Orenstein: For many, many couples, absolutely, that we're so child-centered and career-centered and family-oriented, which are all good things, that the marriage doesn't make it on the to-do list many times. And I think that's very sad.

- Lee Rosen: We need to not do that.
- Susan Orenstein: We need to not do that. We need to make time for the relationship.
- Lee Rosen: Is it the husband's job or the wife's job to plan an anniversary dinner celebration, event, whatever? Am I supposed to be in charge of that? And if so, why is that?
- Susan Orenstein: I'll get you off the hook. No, no. I think it can be the couple. So it can be if one person has a little more time or is a little more romantic they can make plans; but if not, it can be the two people sitting down together and saying, "Let's get out our calendars. When are we going to be able to have a weekend away?" Or, "when are we going to be able to go to a show?" Or something like that. So I think couples planning these things together can be really nice too. It doesn't have to be the burden on one person.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Good. Do you still do -- after 19 years of marriage -- do you buy an anniversary present every year? I mean, I know some people that it's a big tradition that they'll do little stones on an anniversary; they'll add something to a ring.
- Lee Rosen: I think it really depends on the person. So for some people they really like receiving particular concrete gifts that are sentimental, for instance some kind of jewelry or flowers or something like that. But for other people, that isn't as meaningful. So I think it really is about giving what you know your spouse values and loves, not what the culture or the card company tells you to get. So if you know that your spouse really loves a back rub, you can get her a massage or give her a back rub. If you know they like flowers, get them flowers. But to get the flowers and the candy and a card becomes pretty stereotypical if that's not really what that person likes.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Now, don't you feel like -- I mean, I've been coming up with these gifts for Valentine's Day and anniversaries and birthdays and Christmas for 18 years. It's like I'm out of ideas. What do you do? It's like, come on. This is like gift number 85 or something. What's left?
- Susan Orenstein: Right.
- Lee Rosen: Am I required to be original?
- Susan Orenstein: Not at all. For instance, for my husband and I, we will say, "Let's plan something the month of our anniversary where it's just going to be our time together." So we have two kids and we both work. It's very hard to find that time together. So it could be where we go out

to dinner or we go to Barnes and Noble and get coffee or something like that. It doesn't have to be original. It's about making time for each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. I read somewhere that John Edwards -- our former U.S. Senator who ran for President and all that -- that they celebrate their anniversary every year at Wendy's and that that has become a tradition, which I guess that makes sense if it's special to you and your spouse. Interesting.

Susan Orenstein: That's funny. That's great.

Lee Rosen: I wish that we had started --

Susan Orenstein: That's good.

Lee Rosen: My wife really likes Hardee's hot ham and cheese sandwich, so maybe we should work on that. Now, I'm wondering if you get people coming to see you that are using the anniversary, or what didn't happen on the anniversary -- do you ever hear people come in and say, "He didn't get me anything for the anniversary and now we're in marriage counseling"? Is that one of those things that women keep on the checklist of things that we did wrong?

Susan Orenstein: Very good question. I think it would be on the checklist if there was a context for it. So if the background was that there were 500 other things that your spouse didn't do that let you down, then that anniversary could do it because that would be the tipping point. But I think if the marriage is strong and you see that your spouse thinks about you, asks you "do you need anything from the grocery?" makes time for you, calls you during the day to say they're thinking about you, then I think if they even forgot an anniversary -- even that -- I think if there was this context of fun and lightness and this great friendship then that could be overlooked. But I think when one person's already close to the doghouse something like forgetting an anniversary could definitely put them right in the doghouse.

Lee Rosen: In the doghouse, right. Are these the sorts of -- "doghouse," do they teach that when you get a Ph.D. at Temple in psychology?

Susan Orenstein: That's right. That was a whole class.

Lee Rosen: All kidding aside, now you do have a doctoral degree in this field. When you're learning this stuff is any of this practical stuff that we talk about, like anniversaries or like we talked about in the last show with Father's Day, does any of that stuff get discussed or are

you really on a high level talking about humans, emotions, relationships? How does that work when you're learning this stuff? Does everything you know today come from your experience or is any of it back from when you were educated?

Susan Orenstein: It's from both. I think we might use maybe high-falutin' terms or more concepts that we would talk about the importance of rituals or family traditions as opposed to specifics like Father's Day, but really getting at the meaning of things which is how can couples create connection and show that they appreciate each other, show that they respect each other. And then the ways that they do it can be really individual; it doesn't have to be a particular way.

So for some religions -- I think it's Jehovah's Witness -- they don't even celebrate these holidays and that doesn't mean that their marriages are going to be weaker. I think it's about having time together and rituals together and shared values. And if the anniversary really brings that out, fabulous. If a couple just now and then turns to each other and talks about the relationship and makes dates now and then, that's valuable too. So I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all and if you aren't big on anniversaries you're doomed; I don't believe that.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what I'm hearing from you is that when we celebrate an anniversary that it really is -- everybody says this, but it really is the thought that counts. It's not the gift. What I hear from you is it's really more about time than about some special present that somebody has to give, unless that present really means something in the context of that relationship.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Do things come to mind that have made a successful anniversary in your life, or examples you've seen in your clients lives? I can tell you in mine. The one that comes up the most, the anniversary, is where we went to a nice restaurant but the thing that worked was that I had flowers delivered to the restaurant so that when we got the restaurant flowers were sitting on this table. And that restaurant has sort of take on a special significance over the years, that that's where it happened and now we go back there and it seems like that meal comes up every time we go there; she references the flowers. So for guys out there, apparently the flowers to the restaurant scores you a home run.

Susan Orenstein: That's so nice. Very nice.

Lee Rosen: Well, I was lucky. I've had a lot that haven't gone well. But are there things that you've heard about that people do that work?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I think part of your success might be the element of surprise. So I think sometimes doing something above and beyond or when people aren't expecting it that's really thoughtful, is fabulous. I actually heard a couple where they celebrated the anniversary and it was fine, but then the next day is when the husband really did something beyond and that really delighted the wife because she wasn't expecting it.

Lee Rosen: Right. The unexpected day after event. Any of your anniversaries jump out in your mind, something special that went on?

Susan Orenstein: To tell you the truth, I don't think of actual the anniversary day. What we do is usually say, "What are we going to do in the year to celebrate our marriage?" So we might -- I think a couple years we got theater tickets and those were once a month or every six weeks, so we had something like that. Another time we went to Ashville for a weekend together, and I'm pretty sure that wasn't particularly on our anniversary but it was a way that we celebrate through the year; we plan something together.

Lee Rosen: Right. And you're talking about it. You're deciding that "this is the special thing for us" and you're labeling it in that way. That's very interesting. And so it doesn't have to be that day, that moment; but if you're having that conversation, it makes it work for everybody.

Susan Orenstein: And it's talking about pleasure together. So often with couples, once they have children that there's the seriousness of running a business, so to speak, of daily life. Where are the kids going to camp? Do they need a tutor? There's this high energy bill. The toilet's leaking. And so to actually set aside time to think of things in the future to do and to dream and to plan, that really helps couples connect and feel good.

Lee Rosen: Is there a downside? Are anniversaries dangerous? Do they make people reflect on the marriage? Does it make someone say, "You know what? I've been married to this person for 15 years and I'm miserable and I've been miserable for a long time and this is like the reminder that I'm ready to get out of this marriage." Does it make people do a self-assessment when they see that year roll around?

Susan Orenstein: Yes. I've seen that that can happen a lot with anniversaries and big life events, that people kind of reassess, "What's working for me? Am I happy?" So often during anniversaries when people have been married a long time they'll question things. Other times I've seen it

is when their kids are going off to college; that's a big time for couples to reflect and say, "Look, I'm 40 or I'm 50 and I've been married 20 years and life's short. So do I want to be in this marriage and can I find happiness in this marriage?"

Lee Rosen: And so do a lot of people end up answering that question by saying, "I'm done. This is it. I've reached my limit"? Or do they -- where do they go with that?

Susan Orenstein: I think that can often happen. I think people can be very discouraged. So when they come in my office, sometimes I've seen people who have been putting up with things too long and they actually often have good intentions. They don't want to rock the boat. They want to protect their partner. They don't want conflict. So they'll kind of settle for things and put up with things and then at a certain point -- maybe that 20th anniversary or when they turn 45 or when a parent dies, major life events like that -- they think, "This is too much. I'm not going to put up with it."

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, this seminar you teach -- we talked about that earlier, about Stay Happily Married -- what's the idea there? Would that be a perfect anniversary gift, for someone to come to your seminar? Do couples show up together, or how does it work?

Susan Orenstein: Yes. So it's for couples to come together at any stage of their marriage, or even for couples who are engaged. So for couples who are engaged, to couples with little ones, to couples who have been veterans for years. And it's a way to give your marriage a tune-up or sometimes an overhaul. So I think there's a lot of learning. I give people a lot of information and dispel myths about what really makes people happy so that they can at least have some good information as they think about these things.

And then there's an experiential part where I really get couples to think about each other, think about their needs, share some things, and it can be kind of a nice boost, a nice tune-up for couples to -- if their marriage is going pretty good, to even pick it up a notch so they're feeling more satisfied and more energized and closer.

Lee Rosen: It's interesting that you use the term tune-up. And I don't think we think of our marriages as needing a "tune-up," but everything else we have needs a tune-up. I don't know why that is that we don't think of it in that way, but do you find yourself being put in that role where you're dealing with someone whose marriage is working but they want to take it to the next level?



Susan Orenstein: I do. And I admire that a lot because I think life is short and I think some of the couples who are wanting tune-ups have fond memories of earlier days where they really felt passion and closeness and connection and they're seeing things fade a little bit. And so to do some tweaking early on to get things back on track can be really powerful.

Lee Rosen: Does it not surprise you sometimes when you sit down with a couple for the first meeting -- I would assume you're expecting them to launch into how awful things are. And to have someone say, "You know, things are really working and we just want to improve," doesn't that come as a surprise in your office?

Susan Orenstein: Yes. It's great. I love it. They're fun to work with.

Lee Rosen: I'll bet. And you can take them -- I would almost think that's easier than -- it's got to be a lot less stressful for you as a professional than dealing with someone who's just on the verge of collapse.

Susan Orenstein: It's definitely easier when there's still that partnership and the respect. And sometimes even in those couples where they're saying things are really good, they want it up a notch, there can be some hurt. There can be some wounds from earlier on and for those couples to get that out and move on can be so refreshing and helpful to them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that is intriguing. That's very exciting to me that there are those options for folks to not only fix what is troubled but to really reach new highs in marriages that are working. That's really neat.

Well, I really appreciate you joining us today. I feel like you've given us some great insights and I feel more energized and better prepared. My anniversary is coming up in I think 18 or 19 days, so I feel like I'm ready to go and get on the telephone and start thinking this through and talking to my wife and coming up with a plan to really make sure that we celebrate and honor our marriage. And I don't think I would have done that if we hadn't had this conversation today, so thank you.

Susan Orenstein: That's lovely. Congratulations.

Lee Rosen: Well, thank you. So a special thank you to Dr. Susan Orenstein for joining us today. I really appreciate her being here today. And I would like to thank you for listening.

If you'd like to find out more about Dr. Orenstein's practice, you can visit her website at [OrensteinSolutions.com](http://OrensteinSolutions.com). And I will of course put a link to her site in the show notes so you can just click on that and go straight to her site. I think you will find lots of valuable information there about her and her practice.

As I mentioned at the outset, she has a practice in Cary, North Carolina and also has a brand new location in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. You can reach her by telephone at (919) 654-7311.

Thank you again for listening to us this week and I hope you will join us again next week. If you have comments about this show or any show we would love to hear from you. You can reach our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or feel free to send us an e-mail at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). Until next time, stay happily married.

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