

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.



Dealing Lovingly with Disappointment

This is Episode number 25 of Stay Happily Married, "Dealing Lovingly with Disappointment."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We're glad you could join us. I am on the phone with Dr. Steevie Jane Parks. She's a licensed psychologist with a practice in Carrboro, North Carolina. Dr. Parks holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and she's had a private practice since 1988. She's also a certified parent coordinator.

Welcome to the show, Steevie. I'm glad you could be with us today.

Steevie Jane Parks: Thank you so much.

Lee Rosen: We're going to talk about disappointment and dealing lovingly with disappointment, so I think it would be helpful if we understood right off the bat, when you talk about disappointment what sort of things are we really talking about?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, we're talking about any kind of disappointment, ranging from the hot water heater not working in the morning, to loss of a job or a serious illness. I think we're talking about a wide range of things that happen in the course of every marriage where things just don't go as you expected.

Lee Rosen: Right. Just all the different things. I guess every life is filled with little disappointments and big ones. I certainly feel like that's what happens in my family. And sometimes it's trivial and sometimes it's

huge but it always has to be dealt with. Is this something you're dealing with a lot with the folks that you're working with in your practice?

Steevie Jane Parks: Oh, certainly. I think every human being deals with this and I think the way that people handle it is really crucial to whether or not their marriages are going to work and last.

Lee Rosen: What do you see people doing before they -- obviously if they come to you they're looking for a better way to do things. But what are they trying that's not working on their own? How are they dealing with disappointment?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, I guess the biggest problem that people have with disappointment occurs when their expectations are just too high, particularly in younger couples that really expect marriage to completely revamp their personalities and their experiences. And one of the biggest problems is that people blame each other, which sounds kind of obvious but it's very real. They feel like the other person is almost required not to disappoint them and they become very angry.

And instead of confronting the person with, "Hey, this really wasn't what I expected. I'm not sure quite how to deal with this. I need your help," they may withdraw. They may get occupied with things outside the marriage that kind of gives them an escape and just not confront the fact that they're not happy. And that I think is the biggest problem that the people I see have about this.

Lee Rosen: So at the time that they most need to be communicating, they're pulling back.

Steevie Jane Parks: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: So I guess that not only cuts down on the communication, but it must make that person who failed in some way or had something go poorly in their life, it gives them no one to talk to about it, on top of dealing with this other person being upset about it. It puts a lot of barriers between the spouses.

Steevie Jane Parks: That's right. And there's a tendency I guess for the person who is undergoing the problem, like someone who loses a job, to maybe not even want to tell the spouse and not even want to be honest, you know?

Lee Rosen: Right. I have heard stories of men in particular that have been laid off from one of these large research Triangle Park companies who

don't tell their spouse that they've lost their job and just keep going every morning, getting up, going to work; but they're really sitting in the lobby of a hotel or going to the library or something because they just can't communicate it to their spouse. They don't want to say that they failed in some way. They don't want to deal with that disappointment by acknowledging it to the spouse.

Steevie Jane Parks: Yeah. Exactly. I've seen a lot of that myself and it amazes me how someone could carry that lie off.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: And it speaks to, I think, the fact that maybe a lot of couples aren't as close and communicative as they could be.

Lee Rosen: Well, it's got to make it -- you just lost your job and so you're feeling bad about things and then you have no one you can talk to. So it's got to be just awful to be that person who doesn't have their partner to share this with.

Steevie Jane Parks: Exactly. And that's why it's so crucial that the partner really work hard to be supportive, even though they might be very angry and disappointed themselves.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you mentioned young couples with expectations that aren't realistic. Do people grow out of that?

Steevie Jane Parks: I think so. I mean, it's a very well known fact that people who marry young -- very young, like early 20's or below -- are far more likely to get divorced. I know you know that and I think a lot of people are aware of that. And I think primarily that's because they really don't know what to expect and they really have a lot of fantasies. I think as people get older -- I mean, it is also a fact that people who marry later in life do tend to stay together longer.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: They know what's going to happen.

Lee Rosen: They know what's coming, yeah. More experience. Right. So younger people obviously have trouble -- disappointment is a tough issue for them. But are there other types of couples where it's common to struggle with how to deal with things not working out the way you had hoped?

Steevie Jane Parks: Yes, definitely. I think so. I think one case is when there is a chronic illness that occurs later in the life of a couple, and particularly if one

spouse was financially dependant on the other and that spouse who carried the load is no longer able to work; that's a major disappointment for a lot of couples. And one issue that I've seen is that a lot of people -- it's like they don't want to see it. They want to pretend that I'm such a wonderful person; this doesn't really bother me. Yes, my spouse is out of work and I had to go back to work at age 50-something, but I can handle it. I'm tough. And I've seen a lot of instances where couples would rather pretend that they're not disappointed and just kind of stoically kind of push on without really airing their feelings and getting support.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, I've seen that in some folks that I have dealt with as well where I guess they just want to at least pretend -- I guess to themselves and the rest of the world -- that everything is rosy and they're bouncing right along; when in fact things are very different than they had hoped and they're not coping with that properly, I guess.

Steevie Jane Parks: Yeah. I see that a lot in people that right around 40 you see a lot of people that look from the outside -- and I'm sure a lot of people listening to this know couples like this -- from the outside everything is just beautiful. They're attractive people with high paying jobs and beautiful houses and big cars and all that other stuff. And then you find out they're getting a divorce because they can't face it themselves that they're not happy.

Lee Rosen: Right. And are you seeing a lot of folks where the issues that bring them into are rooted in this sort of disappointment, things just not being what they had hoped in whatever way, small and large?

Steevie Jane Parks: Yeah, I would say that I have a fair amount of couples. I can't remember her middle name but there's a great book by a Jungian psychologist. I think her name is Polly Eisendrath and the name of the book is *You're Not What I Expected*. Have you ever heard of that book?

Lee Rosen: No, but that seems like that describes most marriages.

Steevie Jane Parks: Right. And she goes into all these different types of relationships and different patterns that occur, and basically she points out that none of us is what the other person expected. We're all different. We're all surprises.

Lee Rosen: Right. And I guess some folks that you're seeing are better able to adapt to that and some are not. And the ones that are not are the ones I guess that end up seeing a divorce lawyer.

Steevie Jane Parks: I think so, yeah. I think so. I think people who learn how to handle disappointment without blaming and without blaming themselves and giving up are usually the ones that make it.

Lee Rosen: So the themes that are emerging for me as we talk about this are you've got to minimize the blame and then you've got to be communicating. And so I'm curious, do you even see blaming going on when, for instance, there's an illness that causes one spouse really to not be able to function the way that they used to be? In some instances does that other spouse really blame the sick person?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, I think it doesn't have to be conscious. I mean, what I see more often is not that they're consciously saying, "I can't believe this person smoked cigarettes all these years and got cancer." They're not necessarily consciously blaming them but then when you get to talking with them, sometimes unconsciously they're pretty angry. And that can also affect the relationship, even if they're not aware that they're angry.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: I hate to get too psychological on this, but --

Lee Rosen: But it is annoying. I mean, even if your spouse has a cold or something it's just not any fun. It's like, I'm not having as much as I had hoped now, and that is disappointing. Obviously it isn't her fault that she has a cold, unless she was running around with her hair wet --

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, even then, sometimes you can't help that.

Lee Rosen: But it is I guess an easy trap to fall into to blame someone. And when you magnify that times hundreds and hundreds of times with a serious illness I can see how it really is something people don't consciously slip into it, but it's easy to fall into that trap.

Steevie Jane Parks: Yeah. And I think it's normal too because none of us -- no matter how old we get we still have childish emotional responses. It's just part of being human. And I think the key is to accept that, that I'm angry at him because he got sick and we can't go to the movies, or whatever. But I know that it's really not his fault so I'm not going to get mad and yell at him or anything. So it's a matter of we all have these feelings, we all feel disappointed and we might feel resentful, but we have to learn how to handle them without taking it out on each other.

Lee Rosen: So what is the right way to address those feelings? How do you deal with it?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, I don't know about right and wrong; I know more about healthy and unhealthy.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Let's go with healthy.

Steevie Jane Parks: I always have to be careful about this right and wrong kind of format. But if the goal is to stay happily married, which I know it is in this case, there are a number of guidelines that could help spouses to work through disappointments without taking them out on each other or the marriage.

And some of them might be, first of all, like I had said before, don't be afraid to admit that you do have negative feelings in the face of disappointment. That doesn't mean that you have to admit it to your spouse. Maybe just admit it to yourself, that it's normal and healthy and that if you don't face your own negative reactions you may not react appropriately and you might do something that might be hurtful.

For example, if a child is failing in school or having behavior problems, if you weren't aware that you were unhappy about it you'd never schedule that appointment with their teacher and then it would never be fixed. So you have to be aware of the negative feelings in order to take constructive action.

Another guideline is that when you do share these negative feelings, especially with your spouse, it's important I think to refrain from being critical of their character. You know the whole thing about "it's not you that I'm angry at, it's your behavior." Try not to criticize their character but to admit that, "I wish you had handled that interaction with your boss a little more diplomatically." That's okay to say.

Lee Rosen: Right. Throwing the stapler maybe wasn't such a good plan.

Steevie Jane Parks: I mean, let's teach them a little something. And then another guideline might be to show emotional support and expectance. Should someone reveal that they are unhappy with us, try not to be defensive. And of course it's very hard not to be defensive when someone you love is being critical. And try to understand that both spouses are entitled to have and to share feelings as long as they do so in a loving and non-judgmental manner, which of course is easier said than done.

And finally, after you've addressed your feelings and know what the problem is, it's important that the both of you really try to sit down and have some heart-to-heart talks and work together to come up with some kind of plan to reverse the situation and to make your marriage and your life together more satisfying. Like, "What are we really going to do about this? What kind of job can I get now that you're out of work? What can we do together that's going to make us feel better about this?"

Lee Rosen: Right. It's interesting because a lot of your examples are about health, about jobs and about children, which makes sense. I mean, these are sort of the biggies. Are there other biggies that you're seeing in your practice?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, money is a biggie.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: Of course, that's related to jobs.

Lee Rosen: Money and jobs. Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: I think a lot of people -- nowadays, I mean, times are really not easy for most people and particularly young people coming out of college. I mean, their options are far more limited now than they were 10 years ago and couples that are getting together now have to deal with the fact that they're not going to have money for quite a long time, not to mention people in their 50's and 60's who are facing not having Social Security benefits. It's like we all grow up expecting that at a certain point we might be able to stop working, and many of us -- including myself -- will be working basically for the foreseeable future and maybe forever.

Lee Rosen: And we see that a lot in our practice where some women who have been stay-at-home moms pretty much their entire married lives and have been financially dependent on a husband who is now hitting the wall with these layoffs and changes in the economy. And she was taken care of by her family at home and then she got married and the husband has been financially being able to provide and the world is really turning upside down for her. And we have a lot of trouble helping her through -- she really does blame the husband. And we see a lot of layoff and then divorce. Boom-boom. Double shot right there.

Steevie Jane Parks: Right. I see a lot -- I work with a lot of women individually who are in that boat and it's fascinating what happens with them when they

really are able to take that responsibility seriously. And the ones that make it end up pretty happy.

Lee Rosen: Right. When I listen to your sort of steps of going through it, I mean, these folks that are not working it out really are missing the boat on every one of your points. They're not admitting their negative feelings about the disappointment. They're doing a lot of blaming. They're being very critical. They're not showing any emotional support. They're not sharing their feelings at all; it's all negative, it's all somebody else's fault and they feel like there's nothing that they can do or share or be a part of. And things melt down. We don't get to see the people that are working through it with you and are being successful at it.

Let me ask you this. When folks follow your plan, you help them work on admitting these feelings to themselves and refraining from being critical and showing some emotional support and acceptance. Are they able to make their marriages work? If they follow this path are they going to be successful at staying together? Are you seeing a lot of that?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, I can't say that it happens all the time. If it's going to happen my experience is it happens pretty quickly. If they're able to work it through, they work it through fairly quickly. If they have issues that go back a little deeper, then it's harder and I think it's easier to give up. And I don't want to lead people to think that all you have to do is follow these easy steps --

Lee Rosen: Right. None of those steps on their own are easy. Right.

Steevie Jane Parks: -- and you'll work through everything because that's not true. I mean, I personally have been divorced and I'm remarried now -- happily thank goodness -- and it is true that not all marriages can be saved. And not all people have the strength to battle these types of things. I mean, there are certain things that occur in marriages such as abuse or major betrayals where the person cannot forgive and that's their right. And so you can't say that this will work in every case. If the disappointment has something to do with serious abuse issues then the people have to get divorced.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it does sound like -- listening to you is just -- I don't think any of us come to the table equipped and with an organized system of dealing with disappointment and it is inevitable. It's going to happen in all of our marriages and we're going to face this crossroads where we either head in the right direction with how we deal with that or the wrong direction. And if we go in the wrong direction I think it's very hard to back up and get back on the right

track. We sort of dig our little grave there where we have a tough time getting out of it, I think.

Steevie Jane Parks: Right. And a lot of times people get support from people in the community or their friends and maybe it's not the best type of support. If you get together with a group of friends that are married that are equally angry at their spouses you might be encouraged to just pack up and leave before you have time to work it out. A lot of times it depends on the type of emotional support we get.

Lee Rosen: Right. Not all emotional support is positive in terms of helping your marriage to work out. I hear you. It would be easy to fall in with a crowd that wants to be negative about all that and provide the wrong kind of support. I hear that all the time.

Well, is there anything else that you feel like we ought to add to this in terms of helping people deal with disappointment?

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, I think the most important thing is that, as I said before, that people face the issue clearly, how they feel about it and what it means to them; that they attempt to communicate that in some way to their spouse, or if they can't talk to their spouse about it, talk to trusted friends and family members. And that they are able to try to work through a solution that works for both people. And that, like you said just a minute ago, disappointments in the course of marriage are inevitable. They're expectable. I mean, you couldn't imagine a marriage where there's never been a problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. Not going to happen.

Steevie Jane Parks: No one's ever felt disappointed. I've never met a couple who have gone through life where every day was roses.

Lee Rosen: Right. Doesn't work that way. Not in my experience, anyway.

Well, thank you so much. I very much appreciate you joining us today and giving us your advice. I appreciate you being here. Thanks so much.

Steevie Jane Parks: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

Lee Rosen: It really is very helpful I think to think about disappointment in advance and be prepared for it; it's coming. But obviously some of us have dealt with it all along and maybe we haven't dealt with it in the very best way. So I think Dr. Steevie Parks has given us some great tips in terms of a process of thinking about and dealing with

disappointment. It's a normal part of marriage; it's going to happen. Hopefully we can deal with it productively.

I hope that you have gotten something out of this and that you can apply it in your marriage. Dr. Steevie Parks has a website at drsteeviejaneparks.com. Let me spell that for you because I want to make sure you can find it. It's d-r-s-t-e-e-v-i-e-j-a-n-e-p-a-r-k-s.com. And I will of course put a link to her website in the show notes at StayHappilyMarried.com. You can also call her office at (919) 918-1014.

Thank you so much for listening today and I hope you'll join us again next week. If you have comments or questions about the show we would love to hear from you. Call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083 or shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Until next time, stay happily married.

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