

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.



September Songs: The Good News About Marriage in the Later Years

This is Episode number 28 of Stay Happily Married, "September Songs: The Good News About Marriage in the Later Years."

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. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. On the phone today we have Maggie Scarf, who I'm sure many of you will know from her previous books. The best seller *Intimate Partners* is probably the biggie, but also she's everywhere. She's on Oprah. She's on *The Today Show*. She is a real, I think, authority and expert on marriage in the later years and so I'm hoping to share some of what she has learned with you. I really have found her book to be fascinating.

Maggie is a visiting fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University; and she's a fellow of the Jonathan Edwards College, also at Yale University; and she's a contributing editor for *The New Republic*. But for us probably one of the most important credentials that she has is that Maggie has been married for 55 years and she has three grown daughters. So I think as you listen to her talk and you learn about the research she's done, it's fascinating to learn what she's learned from interviewing and studying others. But in many respects Maggie is sort of the case study of what marriage is like when it lasts a good long time.

Maggie, welcome to the program. We're really glad you could be here today.

Maggie Scarf: Thank you, Lee. And thanks for that great introduction.

Lee Rosen: I'm very excited. Your book is all about marriage and couples that have really been married a long time. And the way -- did I understand it, a long time in your book is more than a couple of decades, right?

Maggie Scarf: Yes. It's basically 20, 21 years, plus. But what I'm looking at is couples over 50, basically, which is where gerontology begins -- at age 50 -- and going to age 75. And the reason I'm so interested in this group is because if you think back or look back to the statistics in 1900 your life expectancy was below age 50; it was 47.6 years. Now in 2008 your life expectancy is closer to 80. So it's as if we have plopped in a whole new stage into the life cycle.

And that's what I'm looking at because people have done a whole lot of research on the frail elderly like Alzheimer's and dementia and stuff like that, and the midlife crisis; but, hey, there's this unknown group that has suddenly appeared in the lifespan and I was fascinated to find out there's very little research on them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you're a hardcore researcher but I've been through your book and what I find fascinating about your approach is that it doesn't feel like a book that's really heavy on the research. What it feels like is stories of real people that, at least for me, I could sort of relate to and think about how my life is like theirs or different from theirs. That's been your approach all along, hasn't it?

Maggie Scarf: Yes. First of all, before anything else happens and before I start looking at the research, I really do feel you have to go and talk to people and find out about lives in progress. Just as each of our individual lives is a journey, there is a journey of the couple. And look at what that journey has been like for the Joneses, the Smiths, every kind of couple. And so I just chose that group.

And I chose it for another reason. When I wrote *Intimate Partners* - - which is, by the way, being re-released updated -- but when I wrote that the oldest couple in that was about 49 and I got a lot of flack for that because people wrote in and said, "Hey, what about us? How about older couples? We're still alive and kicking." And so I put that on hold for 20 years and here I am back with couples over 50 and I have also re-interviewed some of those couples that I interviewed for *Intimate Partners*.

Lee Rosen: Oh, that's fascinating. Now, you talk about -- in the book you make reference to this U-shaped curve, which is really about happiness, right?

Maggie Scarf: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And what happens is that sort of at the beginning of the marriage you're finding that people are happy and sort of the happiest in those pre-kid years and what happens as time goes by?

Maggie Scarf: Well, there's been 40 years of influential studies on this and it's called the marital U-shaped curve. And what it is, is that the couple at the beginning are at the peak of their well-being and happiness. And as time passes and the demands of daily life and the demands of young children and being up at night and "you should do this" and "I should do that" and people trying to make rules for their family since the rules aren't completely clear. Some people think women should do so much and men should do so much, and each couple has to make up their particular kind of formula for how they're going to handle their lives.

And as they go through their lives together and they come to the turbulent time of adolescence, dealing and negotiating with their adolescents often is the low point of the marriage. And one of the couples in there, it's a chapter called "Classmates: The Denisons," they talk about how they had to take one of their children to tough love because they just couldn't handle him. Well, now the U-shaped curve has continued upward. Their son Greg is doing fine, their kids are doing fine, they're camping, they're taking classes together and they're back where they were at phase one, which is to say they've completed the U-curve and they're back up there and they're very contented and happy at this point.

I should add that there is a great deal of research that shows that older people -- individuals -- married or not are happier at older ages than they are at younger ages, which is contrary to everything that we would think in our youth-intoxicated society. But the fact is that there have been numerous explanations for that. One is actually biological. There are brain changes as you go through life and some of those are changes to a certain structure in the brain, which is the sight of anxiety and fear and kind of bad feelings, and that loses neurons. There's a new one coming out of Sydney, Australia saying something similar about the pre-frontal cortex of the brain. So part of it is biology.

Lee Rosen: That's fascinating. Well, I found your book to be very -- it gave me a lot of positive feelings and was very hopeful. And I think listening to you part of that is that I have an 11-year-old and a 14-year-old and so I have got to be at the bottom of that curve.

Maggie Scarf: Right. So the model of this book is hang in; it's really going to get better.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that's good. It is a very encouraging book and I think a lot of us who are in that spot, it's very exciting to know that we're going to get back to that high end of the curve, so that is very reassuring. And we are very grateful that you took the time to write the book for us.

So you've been married 55 years. Is what you've learned from doing the research, is it matching up with what you've experienced?

Maggie Scarf: Certainly. But I will say that, like you, my husband of 55 years has said to me, "Boy, this book has changed my life. It really has given me a great frame to look at my life and to look at our lives."

And I say, "In which way?"

And he says, "Well, I don't know. The whole thing has just changed my life."

And I think it is the hopeful and the positive aspect of it because, as you know from reading the book, a lot of the couples have been through hard times. I don't know of a couple who hasn't; most people don't speak about it but they have. And the fact that you do come out on the other end, that we have these bonus years -- that is to say this extra two or three decades together after the nest has emptied -- to re-find each other and to re-find a new kind of intimacy that we had way back when before all the commotion started in the household. That is good information.

Now, of course we've had that. We've had an empty nest for a period of time but still my husband did feel, wow, this really changed me.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it is. It is a very optimistic message and it really is encouraging. We do these shows every week and we hear a lot about the issues that couples have with communication. And I feel like that's the theme that we keep coming back to every week is that really a huge percentage of problems are rooted in failure to communicate. Does communication seem to improve over the years? When people are in these bonus years, these extra decades, are they better at communicating with one another?

Maggie Scarf: Well, I would usually ask a question which was, "How have your arguments changed over time?" And I will say, Lee, that this usually did elicit laughter because they were arguing about the same few

subjects they'd been arguing about since way back when. But what they said was the intensity is different. They can burst into laughter, "Here we go again." They can say, "Let's not have this conversation." It's just at a different decibel level so that when conflicts arise they just don't have that same intensity that leads somebody to go slamming out the door. People can resolve things more easily and they can communicate more easily. Again, there's less static in the household.

Lee Rosen: Right. I think you have a story -- at least one -- in the book where one of the parties had been unfaithful, yes?

Maggie Scarf: I have several couples. I don't think I have a couple in there where they've been unfaithful but I'm perfectly happy to talk about it because I saw plenty of it where people had been able to forgive each other.

Lee Rosen: And they have, yeah. How are they doing that, from your observation? How is that working for them? And I guess obviously they're still married so they figured out something that works.

Maggie Scarf: Well, the way they figure it out is that there is a level of commitment that's called "we're going to work it out." This has been awful; we're going to work it out. I will say that in some cases the marriages became more sexually passionate because of it, because there had been a block in communication sexually and otherwise and that had freed up people to talk about their lives, their sex lives, what they felt they weren't getting from the other person. But basically there was what one study called the marital endurance ethic; that is to say, they were in that boat for life. And you can predict who's going to be that way.

I happen to know of a couple -- and this is among our friendship set -- where the marriage broke up after somebody had been unfaithful for one night. And so I thought of that as a dead twig of a marriage. That is to say that obviously there was nothing worth preserving and they just split. But my people have been through some rocky times, including infidelity, and they've weathered it because at the bottom they never expected to leave each other and there's some decision that's been made that this is my person.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do you think if you were writing this book -- oh, I don't know -- 20 or 30 years from now, watching what you're watching in our culture, do you think that things will be different? Are we raising or are we creating a different type of mentality about marriage that we won't have these bonus years spent together?

Maggie Scarf: Well, actually the divorce rate has not only flattened, it's going down. And that's especially true among couples who have put off their child bearing until marriage and who have the resources for the women to get educated, then get married, then start their families. So there's something being called a marriage gap that now exists so that poorer people who have done much worse in this global economy, where the men can't get jobs and maybe the women do have jobs, they don't think that they -- they hold up marriage as an ideal but they don't think they can afford it.

So poorer people are not getting married; they're often rearing children out of marriage and hopefully that will -- a lot is going to depend on the economy and whether jobs for husbands are around, and whether it becomes less fashionable to -- we see it at the top of the scale, the movie stars bearing out of wedlock and we see at the bottom of the scale the people who can't afford to marry bearing out of wedlock.

But remember, right now the divorce rate is somewhere between 40 and 43. So if you take the other part -- say there's 56-57 percent of people who do stay together, that's still millions of people.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it will be interesting as we move forward to see how things evolve. Now, you mentioned sexual relationships and the marriage and these bonus years. What's happening sexually in the bonus years? How are things going?

Maggie Scarf: Well, what I saw was that some people were having no sex; some people were having less sex than they used to have; and some people were having the same sex life that they always had and were enjoying, it if not the same, even more. And I can say a little bit about that if you'd like me to.

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Maggie Scarf: Okay. When women go through menopause they experience some thinning of the vaginal tissues and they're slower to lubricate. That's the equivalent of the male being slower to have an erection and having a less sturdy erection. So things have to change. There has to be a lot more foreplay. There has to be a lot more inventive foreplay, including oral foreplay. And there has to be stroking and talking and kissing and loving and real closeness before sex happens so that the people are really there as people, not as a set of genitals. That's the first thing.

The second thing, which I think is so interesting, is that men produce about a teaspoon of seminal fluid when they're in their

early 20s and by the time they've got to 40, 50, 60 they're producing a few milliliters. So the pressure to have orgasm is much less and the man can enjoy sex and the partner can enjoy sex without him being in a rush to have his climax, and so he can give much more pleasure to his partner.

So people have to manage this and there are ways to manage it. For the woman there's something called Estring, which is a ring which slowly allows estrogen not into your system but just into the vaginal area. For the man, of course, there's Viagra and all the other things that are around. So sex has to be approached as, "Things have changed. Let's manage it." And if people want to have a sex life and want to have the same old sex life then they have to be thinking about how to have it. If she experiences pain on intercourse, she's not going to want to have intercourse. Who wants to do anything that's painful?

Lee Rosen: Right. But it sounds like there are lots of folks using the latest research and technology and medical advances and making things work the way they want them to work.

Maggie Scarf: Absolutely. Some of the people I talked to were natural opathics, people who wouldn't touch these new-fangled things. And my own opinion -- which I did not give to them because it's none of my business; I was a listener -- but I thought, "How silly. If he's having trouble having an erection why shouldn't he use Viagra or something that would help him along?" But some people felt it's dangerous or it's not natural and I thought that was a little silly. Why not use what's out there?

Lee Rosen: Right. That's a valid point. I agree. Now, let me ask you this. You've got people living a lot longer than they used to. Are there downsides to the longer lifespan? Do you think that there are couples that run into problems just because they're living a lot longer than I guess anybody ever thought we would?

Maggie Scarf: Well, many of the people that I interviewed were people who had -- they talk about a period of accumulation and a period of distribution of wealth. During the period of accumulation they had pretty much feathered their nest. So they were middle class or some of them were better off and they were pretty comfortable about what their future would bring.

There were some people who just hadn't been able to save. One coupled that I described in the book, the Hamiltons, had made a bad choice by buying a condo with their extra funds. They bought a condo in Florida and then the hurricanes hit and so they had been

unable to save. I took their case to several different experts and finally I took it to an expert in tax accounting and I would recommend that anybody who -- and there are going to be more and more people like this -- who's having to lower their life standard because they don't have enough money for a long life span, to check with their tax accountant because this person really had some excellent suggestions for them, things that surprised them. And so I would suggest that instead of trying to find your own way through the maze, if you are somebody who's worried about this particular aspect -- that is, having enough money to last you -- you should check with a qualified tax accountant and ask at the accountancy agency, "Who is good for retirement, gerontology," that type of thing. That would be helpful.

Lee Rosen: Right. It makes a lot of sense. You never know what you don't know. Well, I am just so pleased that you could join us. I feel like you are just -- your research really allows you to be a real optimist about marriages. And for those of us that are coming into the beginning of that third decade of marriage it sounds like we have a lot to look forward to.

Maggie Scarf: You definitely do and I really think that I, who have spent a lifetime problem solving -- I go and I interview people and I help them solve their problems. That's what all my books have been about. But here I am. I've written a book where the people have solved their own problems, where they were just in good shape. I must say, my jaw fell. I was amazed when I started talking to people and that's what sent me to the research on this time of life. And the research definitely supports this, that older couples are happier couples. It's something to look forward to. These years are particularly good years for couples in terms of re-finding each other, finding new intimacy, lots of affection -- sex or not, there's a lot of affection.

That one couple where they were having money problems, I felt so bad for them and at the end of that interview just out of the clear blue sky the wife said to me, "We have money troubles, but are we happy?" She said, "Oh, boy, am I happy." She said, "My husband loves me unconditionally. Now, I was my father's pet, but it was all on his terms and my mother was jealous of me for that reason. Nobody ever loved me unconditionally but my husband loves me unconditionally." And she said, "I'm really happy." And that's this time of life.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that is so encouraging to hear. Maggie, I really appreciate you being with us today. Thank you so much.

Maggie Scarf: Thank you. Thank you, Lee. It was great talking to you.

Lee Rosen: I'd like to thank Maggie Scarf for joining us to talk about the benefits of staying married and what you have to look forward to in the bonus years. Her book, *September Songs: The Good News About Marriage in the Later Years*, is released on September 4th on Riverhead Books. And we will put a link to it in the show notes so that if you'd like to get a copy of it, you can.

You can find out more about the book and all about Maggie at her website, MaggieScarf.com, which also has a lot of other great information and other articles that has written, as well as a blog. So I definitely think it's worth visiting.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope you'll join us again next week. We would love to hear your feedback about this show or any of our shows. We're open to suggestions about future topics and guests. We're really interested in what you're thinking as you're listening to the show. We have set up a comment line so that you can call in. That number is (919) 256-3083. Or shoot us an e-mail -- we look at every one -- at comments@stayhappilymarried.com and let us know how we're doing; we'd love to hear from you.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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