

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.



Indecision: It Can Kill Your Marriage

This is Episode number 44 of Stay Happily Married, "Indecision: It Can Kill Your Marriage."

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 have on the telephone with me from Simi Valley, California Dr. Stephen Frueh. Am I saying that right, Stephen?

Stephen Frueh: Absolutely. Yes. You've got it the first try.

Lee Rosen: Well, thank you. And Stephen is a coach and an educator who is really passionate about helping people make their marriages work, and that is exactly what we need on this show is passion about making marriages work. Stephen has a master's of divinity and a doctorate of philosophy in clinical psychology. Stephen's wife Lynn is a licensed marriage and family therapist and they have created a really unique counseling program that we'll cover a little later in the show.

I always like to tell people this when we start off a show. I like to tell people that our guest really walks the walk. Stephen has been married for 16 years, has got four children, and sounds like things are going well.

Welcome to the show, Stephen. I'm glad you could join us.

Stephen Frueh: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Lee Rosen: You know, I want to talk about your website. I'd like to give people the URL because I find when I'm listening to these things on the Internet sometimes I'll be at my desk listening on the computer and I like to go and look at the site while I'm listening to the show. And your site is MarriageConversation.com. And you've got -- I visited the site -- a lot of great stuff there. You do a podcast. Is it a weekly show you do?

Stephen Frueh: We haven't made it into a show. I have about 50 podcasts recorded and about another, oh, 30 or 40 to record. And we're in the process now of redoing the site so that we'll release those weekly. But we've been building up a library.

Lee Rosen: And they're kind of short. I mean, they really give you some good information without having to spend a whole lot of time doing it. I love that about it.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. They're five to seven minutes, most of them.

Lee Rosen: Well, we want to talk today about indecision. And I think that that is a -- I meet a lot of marriages where that's just an issue for people. How do you see that coming up in marriages? Tell me what we're talking about when we're talking about indecision.

Stephen Frueh: Well, there's a couple of streams that lead into this conversation that I think your listeners will find interesting. One stream is that both my wife and I, when we met in 1983, had come from marriages that were -- the divorces were really, really painful and awful for both of us. And I'm sure they were painful for our partners as well. But for us they were very, very painful and we both individually before we met had determined we are not going to do this. We don't believe in divorce and we don't believe in this kind of painfulness.

So we started dating and we dated for six and a half years. And during that time both of us had had psychotherapy and both of us had advanced degrees in psychology. My wife is a doctor of psychology, a Psy.D.; and I'm a clinical psych doctorate. So both of us had a lot of road under our belt already and yet we realized that we didn't really know what a relationship would look like that would be sustainable and that we could do.

So we started to invent the rules of a relationship that would work for us and out of that came the first book, *With These Rings*. So we worked on that. I'm the model-maker and she's the truth-teller kind of person and so we have our conflicts and conflicts and conflicts and kind of slowly say this is what we see and this is how we think it works. So that's one of the streams to our passion about marriage.

The other stream is, as you mentioned in your note, I was invited to be a keynote speaker at a large city high school -- and this is the part about indecisiveness because when Lynn and I were dating we had a lot of breakups and a lot of "maybe we shouldn't do this" and "maybe it's not going to work" and maybe, maybe, maybe.

Then I'm invited to this large city high school to speak. And I have my notes all prepared; it was an hour speaking thing. And I met the principal downstairs in the cafeteria with some of the guidance counselors and he was one of the most negative people on the planet. And he's talking about the minorities that we have in this school and these kids aren't going to listen, "You're not going to get their attention," that kind of thing.

And after 10 or 15 or 20 minutes of that I really had enough and I said, "I'm going upstairs and I'll be backstage and would you just get me when you're ready to start?"

So when he was ready to start he came out and got me and introduced me, mispronounced my name, and the guy was just awful. I couldn't see how kids could have him as a principal really. So he got out there and he did his thing.

And I got up and I had this sheaf of notes that I was going to talk on. I literally threw the papers on the stage floor and turned to the kids and said -- there was 2,800 kids in that auditorium and I said, "I've been sitting backstage listening to you coming in and I love your energy. I love what you're bringing in here. I love what's happening right now." And then I began to speak on you have to live your "yes." And in order to get to your "yes" you have to know what your "no" means. And what that is about is that most of us live in "maybe" and we better find out what that "maybe" is about.

Lee Rosen: Interesting.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. So that was like those two streams came into my saying to Lynn one night -- my wife -- I said, "You know what? We are going to do this." This is about six years into our dating.

And I had a friend, Dan Rothstein, who's a brilliant psychotherapist, and I called him up and Lynn and I went in to see him. And Dan said to me, "What are you doing here?"

And I said, "Well, we're going to get out of our 'maybe.'"

Lee Rosen: Because you were stuck in your "maybe," yeah.

Stephen Frueh: We were stuck on our "maybes." We were afraid. We didn't want to hurt each other. We didn't want to hurt ourselves. And we had to find a pathway that said "yes" with an exclamation point.

Lee Rosen: Right. So all of that came together and you knew you had to find a way to move forward and to live in your "yes."

Stephen Frueh: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So translate for me. What does that look like when you're in a marriage and you're living in "maybe"? What is that really like?

Stephen Frueh: Well, the first place it shows up is in a very interesting thing for me, that a couple will come to a psychotherapist -- and, as you said, I'm a coach; I'm not a psychotherapist. And that gives me a little bit more freedom to do some things, as I see it.

And a couple will come in and they'll say, "We want to know about your model. We want to know about how to bring new vitality into our marriage."

And I say, "Good. Let's go."

And so they sit down and one of them will say, "Well, I'm not sure I -- maybe I just made the wrong choice. Maybe we're just not cut out for each other." Or, "Maybe we just don't have enough in common." Or, "Maybe he isn't who I thought he was." Or, "Maybe she isn't who I thought she was." Or maybe this, maybe that; maybe, maybe, maybe.

And I'll say, "I think that you're not ready for divorce. I think that you're ready to begin your marriage."

Because the first chunk of time, whether that's -- most couples that do divorce get in there about five, six, seven year period; right about there is when they give up. And I say that first five or six years then was all preamble. It was getting ready for having a marriage.

The marriage is not a wedding. The wedding is a party. And what the marriage is, is can you say yes to yourself, to your deepest instincts about your own loving? Did I make a good choice? Absolutely I made a good choice. Did she make a good choice? Absolutely she made a good choice.

Are we confused today? Yes, we are. Then let's look at where the confusion is, let's look at where the fear is, but let's not confuse that

with the fact that you made a good choice initially. Your radar was working. You picked a good partner, a partner for life, and what we want to do is see if we can get that choice of partner out where you can claim it, where you can give it legitimacy, where you can stand up for it.

And then getting there, then you can begin to get some of the competencies that you'll need to really partner, because most of us - what Freud says was when two people marry, six people get into bed. And he meant that you bring the paradigms and models from your childhood and your aunts and uncles, mother and father and everybody, you bring all that stuff into the marriage. And mostly those models aren't useful or helpful to you in partnering today in 2008 with a woman or with a man that you really want to share a lifetime with.

Lee Rosen: What does it feel like to be in a marriage that's stuck in "maybe"? Is it just you're never quite sure where you're going?

Stephen Frueh: Well, I think the stuck in "maybe" part is that you -- it shows up in diagnosis of your partner. In other words, instead of saying, "I chose Lynn and I love Lynn and she's my partner, and what am I doing here?" Instead of saying that, "maybe" shows up like, "Lynn's cold," or "maybe Lynn doesn't love me," or "Lynn's too busy for me," or "Lynn has a grandchild now and she's always over there," or Lynn, Lynn, Lynn, Lynn, Lynn.

I can diagnose and analyze and theorize about her and that all is about "maybe" because what I'm doing is creating an exit strategy. What I'm doing is saying, "Maybe I shouldn't be in this relationship. I'm getting all wimpy on myself."

And if I can get that "maybe" up on the screen I can say this is not about here. She can be Attila the Hun. This is about my choosing to identify my love of her and choosing to find out what's stopping me from loving her.

Lee Rosen: Right. I hear you. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So folks that are doing that, they don't really -- they're not going to try and work things out. They're not trying to solve this problem on their own, are they? They're basically -- like you say, they're building an exit strategy. Do they come to you with this or are these the folks that hit the road?

Stephen Frueh: Well, there's a couple of things there. The people who are so far into their exit strategy -- my wife helped found an organization called Association for Divorce Professionals. And what they do is take

people who are just convinced they must divorce and they try to give them some pathways to see if it's really necessary or whether they can find a pathway back. And if they can't find a pathway back then divorce -- not an adversarial divorce but a collaborative divorce, which is much less damaging to the children.

So there are some couples that will not ever show up in my office and then there's some couples that will show up and say -- recently there was a couple that came to me and she told me on the phone, "We're really tough, Stephen. I don't think you want to see us. We've seen six therapists and we're both therapists ourselves and we think it's over."

And I said, "Good. I'm ready for you. Come on in." Because I wanted to challenge them and I wanted to give them some of my ideas about what marriage could be and where they're stuck.

So if they're so immersed in the exit strategy, probably -- a typical example would be if one of them is into a really hot affair, probably what's going to happen is they can't stop that train. Our job, our work -- especially if there are children involved -- our job is to see if we can stop the train and see if they can recover the love, the Garden of Eden that got them started in the first place.

Lee Rosen: I'm switching gears a little bit but I don't think I really am. You have a story you tell about cognac, an analogy that you use. How does that fit into all this?

Stephen Frueh: Well, I love that story because it's a story about a therapist talking to a friend who is a restaurant owner. And the therapist was commiserating about fees and actually could not raise his fees, could not really collect his money, and people were behind and he was always kind of whining and complaining.

My restaurant friend said to him, "You know, every time you talk about life I'm touched and I'm moved." He said, "You have the ability to take a lot of life experience and put it in a sentence or two." And he said, "Do you know how they make cognac?"

And my friend said, "No, I don't know how to make cognac." And he took a couple of hours and he explained the process. And in summary it's like if you filled a room with wine, after all the burbling and gurgling and pipes and steam and whatever else you'd come out with a bottle of cognac. So you come out with something distilled and very refined and therefore very expensive.

And he said, "What you've done is you walk around in life observing and listening to people and you study in all the books and you've gone to workshops and lectures and you've taken a mass of material and you distill it down into a sentence or a phrase or a couple of words that really help people capture the essence."

Now, how it relates to "yes," "no," and "maybe" is that "yes," "no," and "maybe" is one of those experiences -- in front of that audience of 2,800 kids I had heard all the negativity of the principal and the others and so forth; and yet, I wasn't in the school, so I hadn't been bathed in all that negativity and I was able to see those kids fresh and start with a glass of cognac with them in saying, "Listen, if your life is lived in 'maybe,' every day is going to look a lot like yesterday. If your life is lived in 'maybe' you're never going to really know who you are. But to get to 'yes,' you've got to know your 'no.' And that means you have to be able to say 'no' to your principal."

I said this on the stage. "No to your principal, no to your teachers, no to your parents, no to your friends. No, no, no, no until you find out the 'who am I' question. Who am I really? So you say no to drugs or alcohol, you say no to a bunch of stuff. And then, only then, can you start to say what you want to say yes to. And then you'll find a pathway of yes, what you can say yes to in your family, what you can say yes to in life."

And so that gives them a glass of cognac. Get it simple. Get it in one little phrase or sentence so that they can walk out of that -- they gave me a standing ovation, by the way.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Stephen Frueh: And I'm not telling you that for my ego's sake. I'm telling you that for their sake. They were giving themselves a standing ovation because they got that little glass of cognac they could walk out with. And they got out in the hall and somebody did something, maybe made a racist joke or a sexist joke or something, and they could say, "Well, actually no. I'm not part of that joke." Or somebody said, "Let's go have a joint," and they would say, "Actually, no."

And I had kids call me from that school for six months later. I gave out my number on the stage and they called me and asked me things and told me things and it was a beautiful, life-changing experience for me.

Lee Rosen: So what do you have to say no to in your marriage in order to find your "yes"?

Stephen Frueh: I think you have to say no to the whiny -- if you're a male like you and me, I think you have to no to the whiny little boy; that's one thing. I have to say no to the whiny little boy in me everyday. "I'm just not getting enough attention." And I have to say no to my fantasies, the Starbucks barista who looks so pretty when she's pouring my coffee.

Lee Rosen: Have you been going to my Starbucks?

Stephen Frueh: What's that?

Lee Rosen: I said, have you been going to my Starbucks?

Stephen Frueh: Listen, they're at every Starbucks. There's a beautiful or several beautiful young women and I look at them and I go -- there's a line in a poem by Rilka [ph], who's early 1900s, and Rilka said, "We must die because we have known them, die of their beautiful smile, die of their delicate hand."

Lee Rosen: but apparently we have to say no; that's your advice. Okay.

Stephen Frueh: Well, we have to say no to this kind of fantasizing self.

Lee Rosen: right.

Stephen Frueh: I say yes to, "Thank you, God, for showing me this beautiful woman. She's beautiful. Thank you." I say yes in my head. But I have to say no to the fantasy that would take me someplace else which isn't good for me.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: So I have to say no to the whiny boy. I have to say not to the fantasizer. I have to say no to the projections, this concept -- that movie projector in your head, the way you kind of look at your wife and try to read into her.

Sometimes I say to my wife, Lynn -- we both practice out of our home here and she comes out of her office and I say, "Are you mad at me?"

And she says, "What?" And she turns to me.

And I say, "Well, you look mad." And she says, "Well, gee, no, I'm not." So I have to say no to my projections. It has nothing to do with me.

She's serious, she's into something, she's thinking about something and she's very, very clear with me about -- when she is mad at me she's very clear and she comes to me and says, "Yeah, I'm mad at you. Here's why."

So I think men have to say no to a lot of fantastical stuff. I think women have a different challenge there. They are so much more relationally tuned in. The book *The Feminine Brain* -- for people listening to your podcast, *The Feminine Brain* is a good book for women to look at. Men too; I've read it.

But it talks about how a woman's brain is so much more involved with relationship issues, so they have to say no to the kind of idealizations they have about men. They have to say no to the kind of fears that they could indulge about men. They have to say no to whatever they have to say no to that will keep them from loving their man.

The no's, all they are is they are guardians so I can get rid of the things that are roadblocks to my loving my woman. And I think men and women have to discover what individually is involved with their saying no so they can get that kind of -- write it out in their journal, here are some of the things I need to say no to so that I can say yes to my partner.

Lee Rosen: That's terrific. That really does clarify things I think, really knowing what your "no's" are opens up the door to what your "yeses" can be. That really is a model that works in my mind.

I get the sense that when you're doing counseling with people, or coaching, that you're doing it in a way that is at least very different than what a lot of us imagine counseling would be like. How is what you're doing different than I think what we sort of envision from watching TV and movies?

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. That's a wonderful question, Lee, because I say "this is not your parents' psychotherapy" to lighten them up a little bit. Specifically men will say, "I don't want to see a therapist," blah, blah, blah. The change started -- I do business consulting and I coach CEOs on leadership effectiveness and I work with executive teams as well.

And there's a company out here that hired me to do some stuff with their executive team and when I got there I looked around the room and one of the guys -- actually, he was one of the VPs -- he was kind of glowering at me and I stopped what I was saying and I said, "Hey, you okay?"

And he looked at me and said, "Yeah. I just don't believe in this crap."

And I said, "What crap don't you believe in?"

And he said, "Team building. We've had team building things and I don't believe in this crap."

I said, "Well, I don't either." And he stopped. He looked at me and I said, "Look, if you give me a chance here instead of making your mind up before I talk, let's see if we can come to a place where I can be helpful, because that's what I want to do."

And then I started talking about my approach. And I wrote on the whiteboard the two most dangerous words for a company, as far as I can see for an executive team, are the words "passive compliance," because those are maybe words, "passive compliance;" you passively comply with what's being asked but you don't challenge it and so you don't embrace it. You don't reject it, but you don't embrace it; you live in "maybe."

So when you say I have a different approach and we have a different approach, what we like to do when the couple walks in -- we see some couples together. Mostly I see couples myself and she sees couples herself, and sometimes she'll send the man over to me to do some work in leadership. And that's another issue we'll get to about leadership within marriage.

So the uniqueness I think is when the couples come in I try to engage them right away. There's a style in psychotherapy that kind of says you act a certain way and behave a certain way in that first hour. I don't subscribe to that style, so I will -- if you walk into my office with your wife I will right away try to engage you and try to engage her. And I'll talk about the marriage paradigm that you bring into my office, which is an outdated paradigm. And that will usually -- especially men, that'll get their attention right away.

Usually what you'll see is that the woman isn't the hard work; the man is the hard work. The woman has her ear to the ground. She's ready to look at it. She's ready to work. God bless them; they teach me all the time.

The man is the guy who's kind of got his arms folded and saying, "I don't really think we're going to get anything done and it's costing a lot of money," blah, blah. So if I talk about a paradigm or a model -- and engineers and all kinds of people can understand that -- then I

just say the paradigm that we have is built on three things and it pretty much has run out of gas.

It's built on 12th century romance; King Arthur and the knights and all of that stuff, and Sir Gawain. It's built on that kind of romantic model and it's built on 15th century, 16th century, protection of property, when the Catholic church amped up the need for marriage to protect women and children who were seen as property. And that marriage has a lot to do with that as we know it. And then it's built on a 20th century party. The average in the United States, anyway -- the average cost of a wedding is \$60,000.

So it's built on those three foundations. Of course there's more, but we don't really -- most of us, if you walk into Starbucks and talk to a couple and ask them what they think marriage is, you won't get a sensible answer. You won't get something you can sink your teeth into. They'll say things like, "Well, it means being best friends," or "Well, it means being faithful for life," or well, it means something like that. All of which you could apply to any relationship. So you say, what is different about marriage?

Now, can I take a little segue here?

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Stephen Frueh: Okay. Here's an interesting statistical observation. In Europe, more and more and more every year it increases, couples decide to not marry. They don't see that marriage is anything to their relationship so that number keeps going up.

In America marriages keep happening older. They keep postponing. That number keeps going up. So I see that there is a trend in Western civilization to really say what does marriage add anyway? And we don't think it adds much and let's just go have it, or whatever.

Now, I'm not a moralist about that at all, but I think marriage adds a hell of a lot to individual growth for the man and individual growth for the woman. It adds a lot in terms of safety for the children. It adds a lot for learning about partnering, learning about leadership, learning about the quality of your love and the power of your love and the impact of your love.

There's a lot of things that marriage, because it is a container and can hold a couple in commitment over time, that it can really add to the quality of life of the children and the parents of the couple. And if it adds value, as I think it does, to the family, that family itself is a

micro-community within a larger community, so therefore it adds value to the community. That's really my passion there.

So what happens that's unique to couples is they get invited into a bigger vision because we have a model -- they say, well, if the old paradigm isn't -- if you don't think that works -- and I don't, because 50 percent of marriages fail --

Lee Rosen: Right. We know it doesn't work. Right.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. It's not working. And so I created -- you know what a bell-shaped curve is. I think your listeners all know what a bell-shaped curve is.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: And on one tail, on the left tail -- let's say that's 10 or 15 percent of all the marriages -- there are marriages that just kind of made in hell and aren't ever going to -- they're not going to get into a therapist's office or a coach's office and they're so dysfunctional and they're unfortunate and sorrowful. But those marriages probably can't be touched.

On the other tail, on the right tail, are marriages who seem like they're made in heaven. There are people that we've met that just seem to have a delicious, delightful connection. They work hard at it and they don't need a new paradigm; they're just working. And they're happy and they're doing well and they're meaningful and they're involved in their communities. And we say they should be mentors to the rest of us. God bless them.

Between those two tails are maybe 70 percent to 80 percent of the marriages and we call those marginal marriages because these are people who haven't realized the promise in marriage and what's possible in marriage.

So in order to really get some traction on your own marriage, what's going to happen is you're going to have to say, what is this new paradigm? What does it offer me and how can I redefine my marriage so that both my wife and I -- or both my husband and I -- can really get our teeth into this promise and live with the same kind of enthusiasm and passion that Frueh was talking about?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: That's the big question.

Lee Rosen: Wow. You know, I started the question off by saying it sounds very different than what I expected in the average counseling session, and it really is. I mean, you're just using a whole different approach and whole different model than everything I think most of us imagine is going to happen when we step into the office of a counselor.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. Because what happens when you step in the office of a counselor a lot of times is that you'll start talking about what do you feel? What does she feel? And what are the issues? And a lot of us are just so bored and turned off by that. It's not that it's not legitimate; I'm not saying that. I'm not shaming or disparaging psychotherapy at all. I have a lot of wonderful psychotherapist friends doing good work. I don't mean to imply that.

But that style is not very exciting and it feels especially to men -- because it's a woman-based style -- it feels to men like, my god, how much can we talk about this? So there's no call to a bigger vision, to a bigger conversation.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that gives us a lot of insight into what you're up to and it just sounds like it works. That is terrific.

Now, you wrote book number one, *With These Rings*. You're now working on book number two, right?

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. Actually, I've been working on -- this book is called *From Marginal to Magnificent: How to Make Your Marriage Sing*. And two-thirds of the way through that I decided -- I'm not the brightest tack in the box here so I thought, gee, I'm talking about all these concepts and probably it would help people if they had something like a guidebook or a workbook. So I interrupted that flow and created a guidebook/workbook.

So two and three, *From Marginal to Magnificent*, and the third one is called *The Marriage Tutor*. Those two will be released at the same time in probably late January/early February.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Going to be out very soon then. Good.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. I hope so. That depends on the editing process at the publisher so it could be March, but --

Lee Rosen: Well, we'll be on the lookout for those. Well, listen, I really appreciate you spending some time with us. I've gotten a lot out of this⁹ and I'm confident that our listeners are getting a lot as well, so thank you so much for doing it.

Stephen Frueh: Well, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. I liked your questions and I shared them with my wife last night. And I appreciate the opportunity. And any time you want to redo one of these, just give me a call.

Lee Rosen: We'd love to have you back.

Now, if you would like to learn more about Dr. Frueh's practice you can visit two different Web sites. I mentioned one earlier but there is WithTheseRings.com -- and I'll put a link to that in the show notes -- and you'll also want to go ahead and take a listen to the podcasts that are at MarriageConversation.com. Lots of good stuff at MarriageConversation.com, and I will put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We love to get your feedback and your comments about this show and any of our previous episodes. It really does help us a lot to hear from you and how we're doing and what other topics you would like us to address. You name it, we love to hear from you.

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

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