

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.



## Put Yourself First to Stay Married

*This is Episode number 45 of Stay Happily Married, "Put Yourself First to Stay Married."*

*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 glad you could join us. I have with me by telephone from Charlotte, North Carolina Dr. Patricia Hogan, a clinical psychologist. Dr. Hogan has practiced with the Developmental Evaluation Center in Raleigh and Carolina's Medical Center in Charlotte and has been in private practice since 1997.

Welcome to the show, Pat.

Patricia Hogan: Hi. It's great to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really glad you could join us. This whole idea of people neglecting themselves in this busy world today I think is a really hot topic. We're all so distracted and we have so much going on and we have so many other people that we have to deal with in our families and in our house, I really want us to spend some time delving into that and talking about the impact of that.

But before we do that, fill us in a little bit about what is your practice like? What kind of people are you seeing? And give me a sense of that.

Patricia Hogan: Well, I do a number of different things. I work with individuals and with couples and I tend to work a lot with women who are in these

situations of kind of being overextended or having not put themselves first for too long in their lives and feeling a lot of stress.

Lee Rosen: Is that something you can relate to? Does that happen to you sometimes?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I'd like to think that I'm on top of it, but you never know. I think a lot of times it's easier to tell other people what to do and I've also heard that often we teach what we need to learn. So I try to take a little bit of it home with me.

Lee Rosen: Well, it is tough, isn't it? I mean, even though you might know how to address these issues, when you find yourself with things out of control at home it's hard to remember all the stuff you know. I mean, it's tough for me, anyway.

Patricia Hogan: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Now, you have kids?

Patricia Hogan: I have two adult step-children. They're both married and off in other parts of the country but we try to keep in touch as much as we can.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, when kids are grown and gone is it a little easier not to get into this situation where you're sort of neglecting yourself?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think it's possible in any situation. I think it's a matter of what is your frame of mind? What are your priorities? Do you think of yourself as being as important as anyone else in the family? So my husband's good at reminding me when I'm stressing myself out and getting anxious, he'll say, "Well, what would you tell your clients to do in this situation?"

Lee Rosen: So it's sort of -- I guess no matter what the facts of your life are -- because I tend to think my life is like this because I have an 11-year-old and a 15-year-old and they're driving us crazy. But it's more about the way you see things, I guess, than the way -- anybody could feel this way, regardless of what the reality of their life is.

Patricia Hogan: I think so. I think when we compare ourselves to other people we either think everyone else has it great or everyone else is a lot worse than we are, and we tend to compare our insides with their outsides. And all we know is what other people show us, but we know what we feel inside. And I think you're right. It is possible to feel stressed out no matter what your situation.

But the flipside of that, and the optimistic side, is I think it's possible no matter what your situation, to have a more balanced approach that I think happiness -- I've heard this quote attributed to everybody from the Buddha to Martha Washington -- that happiness, to be real, has to be apart from your external circumstances.

Lee Rosen: Right. Has to come from inside you. I love that. You're quoting Buddha to Martha Washington but I'm going to quote you. I love that line about we compare our insides to their outsides. That's certainly what I do. You have no way to know what's on their insides, but it's easy to forget that that's what you're doing. That's fascinating.

Let me ask you this now. Let's sort of dig in. Does this whole idea of neglecting yourself -- well, define it for me. What do you mean by neglecting yourself? And then I want to ask what that does to marriages.

Patricia Hogan: Okay. I think of neglecting yourself -- a lot of people, if you talk about self-care they think you mean, "Oh, I should go to the spa and get a massage or get a manicure," and those things are wonderful. But when I think about self-care I think about just paying attention to your body, to your spirit. Am I feeling like my life is balanced? Am I surrounding myself with people who care about me? Am I taking time to pay attention -- if I get that knot in my shoulder now and then, what does that mean? What is it there to tell me? Am I putting myself first sometimes?

And we may get to this several times, but there's such a distinction between self-care and selfishness that I think of selfishness as putting yourself first no matter what; it doesn't matter what the consequences are for other people, I'm going to do what I want. And that's very different from self-care. I think self-care is knowing that if you don't take care of yourself then you're not going to be available for other people.

Lee Rosen: So is that where the danger to a marriage comes in, that you're not really available to other people?

Patricia Hogan: I think so. I think if you -- you know, you can't really give what you don't have. And if you're constantly trying to take care of other people but you haven't taken care of yourself, it's like -- think about the analogy when you're on an airplane and they're getting ready to take off and the flight attendant says, "In case the oxygen masks fall down, if you're traveling with someone who needs help be sure and put your mask on first." That if you don't take care of yourself and

you're not feeling centered or feeling balanced, then you don't even have anything to give other people.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what does it look like when you're looking at a marriage where there really is a neglect for yourself? Where you just didn't put that oxygen mask on, which I love that analogy. What does that marriage start to look like?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think after a while resentment can really build up. And it can come on gradually. Some people are lucky enough to be married to people who are attentive and who will notice those signs and encourage them to take care of themselves. But I think some physical signs might be feeling tired all the time, maybe even feeling tired when you wake up in the morning, and neglecting your health by not exercising, not making healthy food choices.

Some people talk about just feeling restless and frustrated and not really knowing why, just feeling empty. Sometimes it can turn into excessive behavior like eating too much, drinking too much alcohol, shopping too much, looking really to superficial things to feel good.

And I think over time if you're doing that and constantly taking care of other people, again you start to feel some resentment. And then a lot of people who have been taught to feel guilty about thinking about themselves will then feel guilty about feeling resentful and it just kind of snowballs.

Lee Rosen: Right. It spirals out of control I guess. I would assume when someone comes in to see you and this is an issue in their life, they don't usually know it, right? They don't come in and say, "I'm not taking care of myself," I assume?

Patricia Hogan: Sometimes they do. They've done some of my work for me when they do that. I think sometimes people come in with their spouses because they're bickering or they've lost that connection. I think especially when there are children involved sometimes what happens is so much focus is put on the children that the primary marital relationship is neglected, that they're -- I mean, I remember when I was little we used to come home from school and maybe catch Mickey Mouse and then go outside and play and just make things up as we went along.

But now kids have soccer and violin and karate and sometimes the parents are driving in opposite directions all day taking kids to their activities, so they're never home to have dinner together. Or they have that sense of just really leading parallel lives. So sometimes

that happens and I think it's a good time to stop and reassess their priorities.

Lee Rosen: You know, you are describing my house. I mean, it just is crazy modern life today. I mean, I don't know how it got this way but I wish we could roll some of that stuff back. Are there people that are more likely to find themselves in a position of not taking care of themselves? Let me ask you this. Is it more often husbands or wives that sort of fall into this situation?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think it can happen to anyone, but my guess it seems to be more common in women, and particularly mothers. I think some of it's cultural. Some of it is our families of origin. I think traditionally a lot of times girls are raised to -- your job is to go get married and have children and take care of your family and not make waves and be a quiet support, not make demands.

So these days, with so many women working outside the home, they might feel torn between their roles of wife and mother and career and things that they just have to find a way to handle it all. And I know this is changing to some degree, but in a lot of homes traditionally the household duties have been seen as the woman's job, so even if she has a job outside she might still carry the majority of the responsibilities at home as well.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Patricia Hogan: One example I think of, it's not uncommon to hear that a husband is "babysitting" when he has the children.

Lee Rosen: Right. Heard that this morning, actually, from someone.

Patricia Hogan: Yeah. You would never hear them say that the wife is babysitting. So it gives the message that the parenting is really her job and that he's available to help now and then.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Would you say that sort of describing the folks that are most likely not to take care of themselves, it sounds like a lot of folks that are in that sort of suburban lifestyle with kids -- and especially women? Is that a fair -- or do you see it in other communities as well?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think it can happen in other situations too. I mean, I think it can happen, for example, for women in the corporate world if they think the way to get ahead -- that women traditionally have not always been given as many opportunities, so if I want to show them that I really mean business and that I want to advance then I have

to put in the 80-hour weeks and that kind of thing. But I think it can happen anyway.

And like you're saying, even for women who don't work outside the home, even if they've chosen to stay home full time, there's a sense that the work is never done and they struggle to balance all they're redoing.

And ironically, on the other side of that, sometimes they struggle with giving up control if their spouse does start to share more in the responsibilities. That they don't want to do it all but they might resist the idea that it won't all be done their way.

Lee Rosen: Right. He doesn't change that diaper right. Yeah.

Patricia Hogan: That's right.

Lee Rosen: I've heard that.

Patricia Hogan: Change is hard, even when it's good change.

Lee Rosen: That's right. Yeah. I don't think there is a wrong way to change a diaper. So let me ask you this. Why aren't these folks taking care of themselves? What is going on with them that is making them just be so I guess selfless? What is that all about?

Patricia Hogan: I think there can be several reasons. One is that when people try to do too much for too many people sometimes they have the idea that self-sacrifice is a sign of love, that this is how you show people that you care about them. Sometimes it can come from insecurity, from low self-esteem, thinking that this is how I will gain approval.

I like to think of it as there's a difference between giving from a place of love or giving from out of fear, that if you're putting people first just out of a sense of duty -- this is your job, this is what you do to have to prove your worth in the world -- then that's likely to leave you feeling a little more empty. But if you take care of yourself and work on being at peace with yourself, then you come to relationships out of love and out of wanting to share. And in that situation you have a lot more to give. So I think there are messages that people get about what your job is, how you earn your worth, and I think sometimes that contributes to it.

Lee Rosen: So those are most of the -- I guess the big factors that play into how you sort of get into this position in your life?

Patricia Hogan: I think so. I think habits take a long time to form and they take a long time to change. So when people come in and they might say, "I'm not happy with how things are going in my life," but they're not sure what to do about it, it's easy to fall back into the old pattern. We go toward what's familiar.

And it's like making a trail in the woods. If you go out in the woods and there's an established trail, that's where most people go. And if you want to cut a new trail, the first few times you go through you're going to have to hack away the weeds and climb over the stones. And sometimes when you're tired it's easier just to go back to the old trail.

Lee Rosen: I'm going to start calling you Dr. Analogy. You have great -- well, and they work.

Patricia Hogan: I'm a very visual person.

Lee Rosen: Dr. Analogy. But they are very effective and powerful. They really do, I think, help take very intangible issues and make them very visual. It really does work for me.

So I want to ask you two questions here I guess. But one is, I hear what you're saying about people sort of making a change but having a hard time with that; they drift back into the old patterns. But how in your practice, how are you helping people to start taking care of themselves and to make that change? Is it just an awareness that you have to see it in order to address it, or is there more to it than that?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think awareness is always the first step. You can't change what you don't acknowledge and I think some of it, especially in the early stages, is to provide support and encouragement when people -- like you said, they might come in not knowing what the problem is but just knowing something doesn't feel right. So sometimes it's a matter of just exploring what are the things in your life that feel good and what are the things that feel out of balance? And what changes would make -- if you could wake up tomorrow and everything was better, what would be different? And help them identify --

One of the things I really enjoy about working with people around self-care is that it touches on the positive side of my profession, that so much of therapy -- or the common perception of it -- is about pathology. So it's refreshing to focus on what is going right and what can we do to help your life be more balanced?



One of the key terms that I come back to a lot is mindfulness, the idea of being more present-focused. It's important to learn from the past and plan for the future, but when you're -- here's another analogy for you. I always think about the first time I ever went to get a massage I was looking forward to it because I was tired and I wanted to relax and be pampered. And I looked forward to it all week. And then when I got there, I spent half the time on the table thinking about what I had to do when I left, so that by the time it was over I hadn't really been there.

So mindfulness is the idea of just being present to what's going on right now, accepting your feelings, not judging your feelings. There's a lot of labeling, "This is bad. I shouldn't feel this way. I shouldn't feel resentful." So, rather, looking at feelings as signals. What does this anger or this irritation or restlessness, what's it here to tell me? And just learning to pay attention so that you can realize what you do want to change.

Lee Rosen: Right. So it sounds like from a big picture perspective, if this were my issue -- and self-care is probably not my issue. I have other issues. So you're going to help me realize what's going on. You're going to help me see ways that I can change and feel better about things. And then you're going to help me stick with it so that I don't drift back into the old patterns. Is that kind of the 10,000 foot perspective on what you're up to?

Patricia Hogan: Right. And I think that last point, the important thing is that when you do drift back to realize that that's okay. I think when people start to make progress they think it's this straight line and if I make any mistake or if I stumble at all I'm a terrible person and this is a waste of time, a waste of money.

And I think of progress as like two steps forward, one step back; three steps forward, one step back. That when you do get back in the old patterns, not to waste your energy condemning yourself or judging yourself or dumping on yourself for it, but to say, "Okay. I did that because that's what's familiar. But now I know that's not how I want to spend my life," and move forward again.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. Sometimes I feel like when I can see where we're going that I ought to just be able to do this by myself. But I'm old enough now to realize it's hard to stick to things yourself and make those changes. It just is a lot more challenging than intellectually it seems like it's going to be.

Patricia Hogan: And also realizing that when you do make changes that other people aren't always going to support that, especially if the other people in



your life had a pretty good deal. So they're likely to resist that change, so sometimes you need that extra encouragement because you're not just on an even playing field; you're actually working against the resistance of other people.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's an interesting point. So what does a marriage look like - - can you expect -- and I don't think people would be coming to you if life were going perfectly well at home. I mean, I assume even someone who doesn't come to you about the marriage, if they're unhappy there are issues in the marriage of some sort. But where do things go? As you help somebody straighten out these issues and start taking care of themselves, what happens in the marriage? Is there typically a rockier period before things get on track, or do things usually sort of come together at home too?

Patricia Hogan: Well, I think it depends on the other person. If they have a basically sound friendship and respect for each other -- which John Gottman says those are the two basics of a good marriage are respect and friendship -- then if their partner is starting to have a hard time and wants to make some changes, that they'll realize that when your spouse is happy, your relationship is going to be happier.

One thing John Gottman talks about is the masters and disasters of marriage. And he finds that couples who have a successful relationship, one of the characteristics they share is that they have really high standards for each other. And he explains that even his newlyweds, they didn't accept hurtful behavior and they didn't tolerate disrespect.

So I think we can borrow that idea for self-respect, that when you take care of yourself and you expect it from those around you, you have a lot more to contribute to your family. So if the spouse says, "Gee, my wife or my husband's not happy and these are the things that are affecting it. And, gee, I really want them to be happy and I want them to feel good," then they would support that change. And if they don't, then there might be some work to do with them as a couple.

Lee Rosen: I bet it's exciting for you to see somebody come in and leave down the road having really made a change and taking care of themselves and sort of getting past that whole idea of neglecting themselves.

Patricia Hogan: Uh-huh. It really is. It's fun and it's nice to see their energy level come up. And I think in the long run their family sees that when you take care of yourself, when you're renewed and refreshed, you have so much more to share. And that's a real gift to your marriage and to your family.

Lee Rosen: Right. And it's interesting what you said too about in your work you deal with so much sort of hard, negative pathology and this gives you a chance to be in the realm of more positive stuff. I bet this really energizes you and feeds you to give you what you need to move on to the next person and really give them the help they need. So that's pretty neat that you've got something in your work that does that for you.

Patricia Hogan: Yeah. It's a lot of fun.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That's cool. Well, I appreciate you joining us today and filling us in. I think you really have given us some insights and some great analogies. You get bonus points for that, so thank you so much.

Patricia Hogan: Great. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Let me tell you, you can learn more about Dr. Hogan's practice. She has a Web site and it's at [DrPatHogan.com](http://DrPatHogan.com). I will put a link to that in the show notes at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). You can also call her office directly at (704) 442-0035.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. If you have comments about this show or any other episodes, we would love to hear them. We have a listener comment line for you at (919) 256-3083. Or you can shoot us an e-mail at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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