

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.



Sexual Incompatibility

This is Episode number 46 of Stay Happily Married, "Sexual Incompatibility."

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. I have on the telephone with me Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones. She is a psychologist who has been practicing for 10 years. She's currently with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Katrina has a master's degree in forensic psychology, a doctorate in clinical psychology, and conducts all sorts of psycho-educational training. She teaches university students. More significantly, she sees people like you and me and helps with marital issues and with sexual incompatibility.

I'm really glad you could join us today, Katrina. Welcome to the show.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lee Rosen:

Well, I know -- at least, I imagine -- that at some point in every marriage, I just can't imagine that it doesn't come up in every marriage that one spouse feels like things are just a little out of whack on a sexual front. Either they aren't having sex enough or the other feels like it's all their spouse is thinking about; or maybe they're both just not happy with the way things are going, they're frustrated with the level of intimacy in the marriage. I hear about it constantly. Am I right? I mean, that's got to come up just for everybody at some point in a long marriage.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Oh, sure. I mean, it certainly can vary how it comes up, when it comes up and what the issues are. But at some point in a marriage everybody's going to have some level of conversation about their sex life and whether it's satisfaction or, like you said, one person complaining where the other person might think everything's okay.

Lee Rosen: Well, when people come in to see you about this stuff is it usually something that has been going on for a long time, or they pop right in first time it comes up? What's been going on with them?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, that can really vary too. I mean, some people come in right away after they get married because there's a change in their sexual pattern. You know, often when you're dating you're having sex more often, more regularly; and when you get married things sometimes change and so people will come in at that point. Sometimes people will wait for many years thinking either that they're the problem or that it's just a phase that will kind of go away.

I've also found that people kind of bring it up at various different times in therapy. So some will come in to address sex specifically; others will come in because they want to talk about communication and then, lo and behold, this is what really comes up as the problem. So it can be something that was a pattern that existed prior to the marriage, something that they thought would go away, something that developed over time.

So for example often after a couple has children or the familiarity of sex with the same partner for many years results in boredom, that might be the time when they decide to come in.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. Now, there's this idea -- and I probably sort of subscribe to it myself; I think a lot of people do -- this assumption that the husband doesn't really care so much about romance and that all husbands want is more sex all the time; and that wives are more interested in this whole idea of non-sexual love, romance, that that's what really matters to them. Is that really the case? Does a lot of what we're talking about just boil down to sort of gender differences?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, I would say yes and no. I mean, some differences are socialized. We're taught from a fairly young age that men are supposed to be into sex and women are supposed to be into romance and cuddling. But of course that's not always the case. I've worked with a number of women and a number of different couples where the women want more sex than they're getting from their husbands, although they usually want more romance too. It's a combination of both it seems for women.

But gender differences do matter. I mean, you can't say that one thing is for certain with every single person, but kind of in general men seem to need to have sex in order to feel connected; whereas women need to feel connected in order to want to have sex. And if you think of it just kind of on a biological level that men can be aroused by touch as well as visual kinds of things; but women tend to get more aroused of course by touch, but also words, actions, and what's going on in the relationship.

And then the whole sexual cycle is different for men than it is for women. So women can take longer to get aroused in general. Where a man's orgasm can be very straightforward, sometimes it's not as straightforward for women. So it may be that one or both partners don't really know how to help the woman get to orgasm. And then if the woman doesn't reach orgasm, she might not be as interested in sex over time. Men seem to have one kind of orgasm whereas women can have both a clitoral and a vaginal orgasm and then women can also --

Lee Rosen: You people are way too complicated.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: And women can have multiple orgasms, whereas men generally have one and they're kind of done. And so if they're done when they think they're done and their wife's not done, then the wife's going to be unsatisfied.

Lee Rosen: Wow. It is. It's complicated stuff. And I would imagine -- you know, I think our society has sort of become more liberal, but you tell me. Isn't it true that when a husband and wife are in a session with you talking about these issues that even though all of these topics are more easily discussed, it's still not easy for a lot of couples to talk about what's going on with them and where they're coming from on these issues.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Oh, absolutely. I mean, any way you look at it, somebody's feelings are likely to get hurt. It's really hard for people to talk about open and honestly what it is that they like, what it is that they think is not going well in the relationship. And when it comes down to sex it's even worse because we're not supposed to talk about sex, even if we are more liberal about it. You're not supposed to talk about -- especially I think for women, we're still not supposed to talk about liking sex, even if it's with your husband.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you get a lot of situations -- I'm assuming, based on these sort of stereotypes -- where men are coming in and saying, "Hey, look, I'm approaching this topic with my wife all the time. She

says no." There's just this rejection over and over again. That has fallout, doesn't it, aside from just not getting what you're looking for from a sexual standpoint?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Absolutely. I mean, for women to feel that they're being asked over and over again, they tend to feel pressured. And when women feel pressured then they're less likely to be interested in wanting to have sex. And for men, when they're asking over and over again they feel rejected. And rejection can be doubly painful when you're aroused and so you might have the man lose his interest at that point. So a man needs to be able to ask but not in a pressuring kind of way, whereas a woman needs to be able to feel safe saying no.

Lee Rosen: So okay. I buy all that, although it's a ridiculously difficult catch 22.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Right.

Lee Rosen: The more you ask, the more she will say no. Oh, okay. So I won't ask. So your suggestion is ask in a way that doesn't create pressure so you're not sort of -- that particular request doesn't go on the list of you asked too many times.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Will you model that -- how do you ask with no pressure?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, I think part of it is being able to have a conversation ahead of time about what it is that your expectations are. And that's what can be really difficult for people. So being able to talk about how often do you want to have sex and how often does your partner want to have sex, and maybe you won't be in agreement but maybe you can come to some sort of middle ground.

And so whether it's that you agree that you're going to have sex so many times a week, or if it's just that you agree that these are my signals of I'm interested in sex or I'm not, so that the husband can get really good at -- he can ask his wife for sex, but being able to tell that she's too tired, she's tense, that type of thing, so that it can be an easy, "Oh, I can tell that you're not feeling good today or you're not in the mood," and not putting the pressure on.

Lee Rosen: What if we flip that whole situation upside down? Is there fallout from -- you mentioned that there are women that come to you because they're not happy with the frequency of sexual relations with their husband. Do husbands go -- is there fallout for them when they feel like they're being asked too much, and is that different?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Yeah. I mean, if women are initiating the sex more regularly than their husbands then men can feel worse about themselves, they can feel performance pressure, and they can lose interest as well. So they need to have messages that I really love you and I'm interested in having sex with you, not just sex in general. And having that sense of I'm confident in our relationship and I want to be with you, making it very clear that it's not about you have to perform in a certain kind of way; I just want to connect with you.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, do you notice things that couples have in common that are coming to you with sexual issues? Are they in similar places in their lives or similar circumstances? Are there things that lead to this issue becoming a big enough issue that they need to come and see you?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, part of it is just as we get older we have more responsibilities, right? So you get married and then you have kids. You don't get enough sleep. You don't get enough time to yourself as a couple. You're stressed out from work. You're cranky and you're tired. It's amazing anybody ever has sex sometimes is what I think.

But that doesn't mean that it has to stay that way. You can pay attention to how are you balancing the stress at home and the stress at work? Making sure that you have time for yourself as a couple; making sure that you're taking care of yourself and eating well, sleeping well, exercising.

But the other thing that seems to happen is as women get older they have problems with lubrication. And so middle-aged couples don't necessarily always know that and they will be thinking that the woman's not really aroused or interested in the husband anymore. And as long as they can get some education about becoming comfortable with using a lubricant, then that's an easily solved problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. This topic seems to come up a lot on this show. I don't know how exactly I ended up with this job but it's working out. So yeah, never would have thought I'll end up talking on the Internet about sex. Really?

So let me ask you this. When a couple's sex life is not working the way that they want it to, obviously that's going to have an impact on the rest of the marriage. I mean, we don't isolate that piece of our relationships. What other issues do couples -- what are they dealing with that are connected to the whole sexual incompatibility?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, the first thing that I would say is that if either partner really has a significant problem with either arousal or performance for more than a month that they should make sure that there aren't medical reasons for the problems. Because that can happen, particularly as you get older, that you might attribute to problems in the marriage where really it's a medical problem that can be taken care of. So it's always good to have that checked out.

But also, depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol use, kind of the big things that can cause problems with sexual intimacy. And then when you look more closely at the marriage, when people are fighting they don't feel as connected; they don't want to have sex with one another. After you have a baby, whether it's related to the baby keeping you awake all night long, or whether it's related to weight gain, not feeling as attractive, not being attracted to your partner, all kinds of things. Medical conditions, financial changes, and just about anything that impacts the way that you think or feel can turn up in the bedroom and cause problems in your relationship as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do you see people trying to work this out on their own in any particular ways? Are there things that they do that aren't working out before they come to see you?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, it seems like what usually happens is that one person will mention it. Maybe there'll be a small period of time where they've tried to work on it but it's usually brought up in a way where the other partner feels rejected or they're angry or sad so nothing really productive or long-lasting seems to happen.

So because it's such a touchy subject it's really hard for people to talk openly and honestly. And I think that's one of the reasons that this is the type of issue where a couple can come into therapy and maybe make more gains than just trying to talk it through themselves, because not only can you get education but you can also have that mediator in the room to say, "Okay, the intention wasn't to be rejecting or hurtful. Let's talk about this in a way of what's really going on," and being able to keep some lid on the anger.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, this does feel like it has a lot of explosive potential. This is not about who's going to make the school lunch.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Right.

Lee Rosen: It does have a lot of energy around it that could really go in the wrong direction. Do you tell folks that they should -- let's say that a

husband calls and is upset about the way things are going but he says wife won't come. Do you say come on in anyway? Do you need to see both parties together, or how do you deal with that?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, I think it's preferable for both people to come in but I see a lot of people individually where either one person in the couple has said, "You need to go to therapy because there's something wrong with you" -- I get that a lot -- or where one person says that their partner isn't willing to come in. Maybe they will later, but they're not willing to come in yet.

And so certainly kind of laying the groundwork of what's going on in the relationship and what can that one individual do to try to make some changes that will help show their partner that they're willing to work on this, they're taking it seriously, and why it would be helpful for them to come in together.

Lee Rosen: So somebody comes in -- the couple comes in, which I think is great because I do think there's a whole set of issues there, getting themselves to your office in the first place. But if they make that step and they really want to get their lives on track on the sexual front, what's the first thing that you're going to -- what's the first step, the first bit of advice you're going to give them?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, it's really figuring out what's going on and what is the incompatibility about. Is it technical in that they've never really talked about what they like and want from each other sexually and they don't know how to satisfy one another? Or is there some other underlying thing going on with they're fighting or one person is depressed? So kind of figuring out what's going on.

And then thinking about that you need to take the pressure off. That yes sex is very important in a marriage, however we're going to take a little hiatus for, say, a week or something like that where the person who's maybe always asking for sex doesn't get to ask for sex for a week; and the person who's not usually asking for sex is encouraged to initiate it when they feel interested in it. So almost a role reversal of the one person having to wait and the other person having to initiate it.

Lee Rosen: Does that work?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: It can. Sometimes what happens is that people --

Lee Rosen: Well, then I'm coming over.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Sometimes people will say, "Oh, I get off the hook for a week and I don't have to have sex."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: And then it's a matter of, okay, so that's what happened this week. Let's talk about why you feel like you need to be off the hook. So if nothing else, it's just good information.

Lee Rosen: Right. If that worked every time, that would be worth the price of admission right there.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Right.

Lee Rosen: It's like, what's your next available hour?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So I have heard people suggest -- professionals I think suggest -- that couples set like a regular date. Every Tuesday night at 9:30 or whatever it may be as a regular meeting for sexual relations kind of time. Is that something that makes any sense? Does that work?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Yeah. That is something that works. It's not something I would recommend if there is an underlying medical problem or if there's a real underlying problem in the relationship that need to be worked on first. I usually recommend it for people where one person just really wants sex more than the other person and there's that kind of pressure, because it can help the person who wants it more to know that at least they're going to get it on Saturday night or Tuesday night or whenever. And the person who's not as interested, it helps them recognize that they don't have to fend off advances every other night of the week.

And it can help build the tension and bring some of that fun and romance into it if you know you're going to plan a date night, maybe buy some new lingerie, maybe buy some candles, figure out if you're going to go out for dinner beforehand, knowing you're going to get out of the house and away from the kids. It also shows each other that you're really interested and that you're willing to work on this together rather than one person always feeling like they're asking, the other person always feeling like they're rejecting.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Well, I know this is sort of a broad question but we've been talking about sexual incompatibility and I feel like we've covered a broad range of things here within this

topic. Is there anything else that folks really ought to know about sexual incompatibility?

Katrina Kuzyszyn: Well, I think that the big thing is to take the pressure off. Just making sure that you don't feel like this is something that the more you ask about it, the better it will get fixed. So knowing how to talk about what you like and what you don't like and being open to have that conversation; being willing to try something new if you are in a rut, but remembering that you have to keep it within your comfort zone. Men tend to be a little bit more open to trying new things; women tend to be more concerned that they're going to be uncomfortable with it.

And then making time. Sometimes you have to have sex when you don't want to have sex. And being willing to have some compromises about when you do and don't have sex you're remembering that sex really can bring you both together biologically and emotionally. It actually helps release stress. It actually helps you feel more energized. So when you think, "Oh, I'm too tired and stressed out," maybe that's the time when you should be having sex.

And then it's not always about the orgasm. Just being willing to touch sensually and not having that pressure of having to perform or one person having to have multiple orgasms or something like that.

Lee Rosen: Great advice. Everything you've said just makes a lot of sense. It's very practical, down to earth, and I really think that you've given a lot of good advice to folks that are dealing with this issue. So thank you so much.

Katrina Kuzyszyn: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: Well, I really enjoyed that. I think I got a lot out of that, learned a lot. There rarely is a show that I don't feel like I've learned something and this is no exception. I'd like to thank Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones -- have trouble with that name -- Kuzyszyn-Jones for joining us to talk about the impact of sexual incompatibility, which realistically is just something that you're not going to be married and not have to deal with this at some point or another.

You can find out a whole heck of a lot about Katrina's practice, the counseling and therapy services that are offered. They have a website, the Lepage Associates website. The URL is LepageAssociates.com. That's L-e-p-a-g-e Associates.com. I'll go

ahead and put a link to that site at StayHappilyMarried.com so that you can find it easily. You can also call her office at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week and I hope you got a lot out of this program. If you have feedback about this show or any of our shows we'd love to hear from you. We have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com and let us know how we're doing or suggest topics or future guests. We love your feedback; we get a lot of it and really appreciate it.

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

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