

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.



Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting

This is Episode number 59 of Stay Happily Married, "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting."

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'm here by phone with Dr. Colleen Hamilton, a psychologist who is currently with Lepage Associates in Durham. Colleen holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and has worked with everyone from children to adults, all the way up to folks in their 80s. So works with families to address conflict resolution, non-compliance and communication.

Welcome to the show, Colleen.

Colleen Hamilton: Hey. It's nice to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad that you can talk with us about fighting. That is a -- I guess that is reality for a lot of us and it definitely is -- I don't know. I guess you'll tell us. But I would imagine that in every marriage there's at least some fighting and probably in some situations too much of it. I see couples getting defensive and things turn into big arguments, they don't get resolved, and it just kind of gets out of control. Are you seeing a lot of that at your practice where folks are really just at one another's throats?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, when problem solving becomes difficult in a marriage, it becomes easy to allow fighting to escalate and compound existing problems. Fighting usually originates from some underlying feelings since we've lost vulnerability, sadness; and when those go

unresolved they build to anger, which again leads to the fighting. And without knowing how to fight constructively, that's especially true. So you're still faced with the underlying issues that were at hand, plus the increase in tension and resentment that builds from arguing frequently or explosively.

Lee Rosen: So when we talk about fighting, I mean, I assume you're looking at situations where couples are -- what that means is probably different in every marriage. I mean, I'm sure you've had situations where folks -- it has gotten so out of control that there is literally physical punching, kicking, that sort of thing, yes?

Colleen Hamilton: Yes, I have seen that.

Lee Rosen: Okay. But I would assume that's not the norm. Can you give me a feel for what's typical out there? And how much are people fighting? I want to know, like, if my wife and I are fighting every night and there's a lot of yelling and screaming that the kids are hearing in the other room, is that the norm or is that the exception?

Colleen Hamilton: That's leaning towards the exception. Every couple argues. Everyone has their own individual feelings, their own world view, and they're going to come into conflict at times. So it's the frequency and the intensity of the fighting when it leads to yelling, screaming, name calling, that becomes more of a concern.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And so that's sort of out of control. When you say "fighting" and you see it -- I mean, do you ever have folks that come in that they say they're fighting and you're like, "No, no, no. This is reasonable. This is normal interaction. You guys really don't have a problem." Is there ever that, where I guess people think it's more than it really is?

Colleen Hamilton: Yes, there definitely is. And what those couples tend to need is more instruction and guidelines of how to argue more effectively and a problem solving approach to reach a resolution, and that's where they're having more difficulty. It's not escalating but they're not able to resolve underlying issues.

Lee Rosen: But it's normal, right? I mean, everybody is fighting at some level or another, yes?

Colleen Hamilton: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Go ahead. What were you going to say? I interrupted you.

Colleen Hamilton: I was just going to say that's very common. Like I said, everyone has their own perspective so those are going to clash from time to time and it's very uncommon -- extremely rare -- to find a couple that doesn't argue and have conflicts at all.

Lee Rosen: What about these annoying -- people that I went out to dinner with that drive me crazy that act like they never fight? And maybe they don't. I mean, I don't really know. But at least they say they never fight. Is that a good thing?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, first of all, like we said, it depends on how they're defining fighting.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Colleen Hamilton: So they may not come to explosive blows. Of course, they're going to have some arguments and some conflict and some disagreements along the way. They may have better skills to be able to resolve that or not. But to have a couple that never fights means that they're not bringing up their own feelings and they're ignoring their own feelings, so they're not being heard and acknowledged by their spouse. And that can lead to festering problems underneath. So when an argument does occur, it's going to be more explosive and you're going to be pulling up everything from the past that you haven't pulled up before.

Lee Rosen: Gotcha. Do you want people to fight? I mean, is that an okay thing from an expert standpoint? Do you want them to be having some fighting?

Colleen Hamilton: Yes. I mean, that is an open line of communication. If you're refusing to fight, you're refusing to have conflict and that cuts down as much communication as refusal to speak or such extreme fighting that nothing's getting resolved. It has the same long-term effect if you're not bringing up any of the issues that are disturbing you.

Lee Rosen: Gotcha. So I guess when you're working with a client what you're headed toward is some fighting but not too much. You're looking for the right balance. And I assume you're going to tell us that we ought to do it in the right way.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly. I mean, one of the things I've said is it's better to let go of it than to fight about it. And sometimes that's true. You need to pick your battles and pick what's important to you. If it's an annoying habit that your spouse has, clicking, tapping their fingers, leaving the toilet seat up or whatever, that may be something that's not

worth fighting about. But the issues that are more important, you do need to have those conversations about. So it's really about picking your battles rather than letting everything go.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That is tough, though. I guess when you get to a point where you've been fighting a lot, that whole picking your battles thing gets harder and harder because it feels like every issue is an opportunity to kind of go back and get it out of your system again, I guess. I mean, it sort of seems like once you've stepped over the line it's going to be hard to move back.

Colleen Hamilton: Yes. And once you have that higher stress level that comes with fighting, your fuse gets shorter in all situations. You can see even when you're high stressed at work, your fuse at home tends to be shorter too because you just don't have an unlimited supply of coping skills and patience and resources.

Lee Rosen: Right. So each time I guess it gets a little bit -- each fight starts off at a new level because of the last fights.

Colleen Hamilton: Right.

Lee Rosen: You know, do you find -- and I'm just curious about this, but in your practice do you find that -- like if I were in your office with my wife, she would have a list of the -- she would remember the fights. She would be able to quote everything I had said. And I would have already kind of written it off and I would just be able to say, you know, "Oh, you were in the fight too." You know? I mean, I wouldn't have the detail. Is that fairly typical of what you hear in the sessions that you're doing? Do the women always come in with these well prepared briefs on what they're going to say?

Colleen Hamilton: Not always. It can go either way; it's not necessarily divided by gender. But usually there is one party who does have more detail and more recollection of what the fight was, what was said, and it tends to be the partner in the relationship that doesn't feel that they've been heard before and hasn't had their feelings validated by their spouse.

Lee Rosen: Right. And they've got the list.

Colleen Hamilton: Sometimes they do.

Lee Rosen: What about when folks are fighting in front of children? Is that something that you ought -- should you figure out a way not to have these arguments when the kids are around?

Colleen Hamilton: That's a very tricky road. Sometimes things come up at the dinner table and the kids are there. So at that point it's the adult's responsibility to say, okay, is this something that we can resolve through a discussion that shows that there's a disagreement of opinion, or is this something that's going to escalate? At which time we need to talk about it later after the kids are either in bed or out of the house or not going to be witness to it.

So fighting or arguing in a way that shows resolution can actually model good problem solving skills for the kids --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Colleen Hamilton: -- [inaudible] the spouses, oh, look, they listen to each other. And secondly, kids can always sense when there's tension. So if they see, "Oh, there's tension and my parents were able to work it out," they get sense of security; you know, "It's going to be okay and my parents can handle this."

Lee Rosen: Gotcha. So they can learn a lot from seeing a good fight.

Colleen Hamilton: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. "A good fight" doesn't sound that -- yeah.

Colleen Hamilton: Right. If it's going to get to the yelling, screaming, name calling, or pulling up all these things from the past, or if it's in a content matter that's above the kids' developmental level, then you don't want to have it in front of the children. It'll just confuse them and scare them.

Lee Rosen: Scare them. Make them feel like things are not safe in their house, I guess.

Colleen Hamilton: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Right. So a couple comes into you and they've been complaining about the fighting that's going on. Where do you start? What's the first thing you do to try and get them on the right track and improve things?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, the first thing I do is it's important to have those problem solving and communication skills in place before you start tackling the issues. If you don't get those problem solving skills and communication skills developed, the conflict in the office is going to very much similarly mirror the conflicts that are going on at home.

So that's the first place where I start, is teaching them problem solving skills; teaching them communication skills so they're not interrupting each other, so they're using the active listening skills and being able to clarify points that they're not clear on, and validate their spouse's feelings that are underlying the fight, because without that they're not going to be able to work through any issues.

And then it comes down to identifying what the issues are. I usually start with a couple of simpler ones so that the couple can experience some success in using their new skills, and then tackling the bigger problems.

Lee Rosen: Do things ever disintegrate into fighting right there in front of you?

Colleen Hamilton: It has.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Colleen Hamilton: It's not typical but at times it has.

Lee Rosen: Wow. So you have to kind of lay low and get down behind the couch or whatever.

Colleen Hamilton: Yeah. In some sessions we've literally had like a stop sign or a ball that you had to have in your hands for it to be your turn to speak so that it didn't get into the "I'm trying to yell over you" pattern.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's a dangerous job you have there. Do you ever get pushed back from -- when you're trying to teach these skills and you're talking about how to work things through, do you ever get people arguing with you about whether that makes any sense or whether that's a good plan?

Colleen Hamilton: Sometimes they do. And it's very common to experience resistance when you're trying to invoke any change in people. Although they see that their fighting style is not effective, they're still comfortable in it because it's their habit. So it is common to say, "You know, I don't want to do that" or "I don't think that'll work" or "we've tried that." And a lot of it is encouraging them, "Well, you're in a different place now. You're a different person now. Let's try it again." And once they experience some success with it, then usually that resistance and push-back decreases significantly and quickly.

Lee Rosen: Right. What's your favorite -- when you think back to all the folks that you've worked with and helped with fighting, what couple

comes to mind, what story is there that really you saw things change a lot?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, I had one couple that I worked with and they were actually not living together at the time because of employment issues. So they were operating two households and kids going back and forth and they would fight about everything from, "You didn't return this pair of the kid's pants" or "he stayed up a half hour too late" or "she didn't brush her teeth enough while she was at the house."

And what it came down to was figuring out, okay, what are the expectations? What are the rules? And developing the rules and expectations and schedules so that it could be consistent in each household because that hadn't been discussed previously. So it was just when it was done as one partner saw it as wrong, then it became an issue. But there was no conversation ahead of time about their philosophies and their scheduling and their opinions on the childrearing.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's very interesting. Now, are there tips that you have, like the top tips for fighting and making it work for you, or for eliminating fighting, or what have you got?

Colleen Hamilton: Well, the first thing that's most important is identifying what the problem is. And when you're fighting about a certain problem or a certain issue, to have that clearly identified and kind of highlighted before you start so when you do start bringing other things in, that you can say, "Hold on. That's a separate issue. We can talk about that another time and let's stay focused." Because we tend to get derailed when we argue and start pulling in other things and at the end everyone's just upset and nothing is taken care of. So being able to have that specific topic so you can stay on focus and work through it is the first step.

Secondly, it's important for each spouse to be able to disengage. If it's becoming too emotionally heated, you're not thinking as clearly and that's when you tend to see the name calling coming in and the voices raising and that becomes no longer productive. So it's important for each one to be able to say, "Okay. This is getting too heated right now. We need to take a timeout from this argument," and at the same time saying, "We'll get back to it tomorrow night," or in an hour, so you know that it's not just back-burnered forever but there will be a time to come back to it and each person gets a chance to pull down as needed and respecting that when your spouse requests that timeout.

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Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Good tips. Well, Colleen, I appreciate you filling us in on some ideas about fighting. I really am glad you were able to be with us today. Thank you so much.

Colleen Hamilton: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: And I hope that you got something from that and are able to take it home and put it to work for you. The whole idea of fighting and making it -- I guess cutting back on the fighting but if you're going to have some fights -- and it sounds like we all are. I almost hate the word "fights;" it just sound worse than it probably needs to be. But if we're going to have them, it sounds like we can do it in much better ways. And Colleen has given us some good ideas about how to do that.

You can find out a lot more about Colleen's counseling and therapy services at the Lepage Associates website. It's LepageAssociates.com. I will put a link to that in the show notes at stayhappilymarried.com. You can also call her office at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope you will join us again next week. I love to hear your feedback and I am thankful for all the feedback we get every single week. If you would like to give us anymore input, you can call us on the comment line at (919) 256-3083. You can also send us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Let us know how we're doing. Give us ideas for topics you'd like to hear more about. We would love to hear your feedback.

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

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