

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.



Are You Too Dependent on Your Spouse?

This is Episode number 62 of Stay Happily Married, "Are You Too Dependent on Your Spouse?"

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 am here live in person with Jennifer Coleman, life transition coach with Rosen Law Firm. Jennifer helps clients set goals and priorities for their lives. She has a master's of science in marriage and family counseling and is a nationally certified counselor. Jennifer's been married for 13 years and lives just outside Charlotte, North Carolina with her husband and two children.

Welcome to the show, Jennifer.

Jennifer Coleman: Thanks, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You now have a private practice in addition to seeing the Rosen Law Firm clients, right?

Jennifer Coleman: That's correct. I work with a group called Eastover Psychological.

Lee Rosen: How long have you been doing that?

Jennifer Coleman: Oh, since about January of this year.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited that you're doing it in Charlotte. My hope is that you'll see some Rosen clients in your private practice. For a long time you were working out of the Raleigh office and then you moved off to Texas for, what, a couple of years?

Jennifer Coleman: A couple of years. Glad to be home.

Lee Rosen: Well, I want to dig into this topic of people being too dependent. And I get the sense that that is, at least in some couples, really a source of difficulty. Is it something you've seen in your practice?

Jennifer Coleman: I've definitely seen it over the last seven years of seeing couples, and often times seeing just one partner in a couple who comes because they're unhappy about the dependence that their spouse has on them.

Lee Rosen: What does it look like? When a marriage is suffering from somebody being too dependent, what's going on in that family? What's happening?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, typically one partner or the other has gotten really used to getting their emotional needs met by this one particular person, who's their life partner. And you would think, well, that's mostly a good thing, right? Because we want to get our emotional needs met through our life partner and that's actually an appropriate person to do that with.

But sometimes when that gets exclusive, the party that's being depended on can start feeling resentful about that and can even see this other person as not as attractive because they seem needy.

Lee Rosen: Sort of like you're getting -- I guess your life gets a little claustrophobic from a relationship standpoint?

Jennifer Coleman: Right. That's a good way to describe it.

Lee Rosen: You know, I've always seen mental health professionals use this model of, like, my life is a circle and my spouse's life is a circle and then our marriage is where those two circles overlap.

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: Would you agree that in the healthiest marriages the circles don't overlap completely; they just overlap partly? Is that sort of what we're shooting for?

Jennifer Coleman: Absolutely. I think in a healthy marriage both individuals get to retain what makes them an individual, what makes them unique. And that means that they still engage in their own interests and hobbies outside of the marriage and there are also things that they enjoy doing together and ways that they grow together.

If your two circles go apart in different directions and you don't have anything in common anymore -- we've seen that situation a lot when people are divorcing as well. But it's equally as dangerous if those circles overlap too far and one person begins to feel like they don't have a life outside of their partner.

Lee Rosen: So are these the people that -- like, you'll see somebody at work whose spouse is calling them like 12 times a day. Is that the sort of couple we're talking about, where they're just kind of in each other's business constantly? Or I guess one of them is in --

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: It's not usually mutual.

Jennifer Coleman: It's not usually mutual. It could be. But I think there's less dissatisfaction when it's mutual. The time when someone becomes dissatisfied is when one person is really seeking and the other person is withdrawing. So if one partner's calling 12 times a day, it's really how does the other person perceive that? Are they like, "Oh, it's so cool; he needs me; he wants to talk to me"? Or is it, "I'm really feeling annoyed"?

And one thing that I notice in my practice that's common is when people marry young they often perceive the traits early on to be -- if someone's calling 12 times a day they might think, oh, this person is protective. This person values me. I appreciate this attention.

Ten years later they feel like they're emotionally growing up, they want some independence, they want to do things for themselves, and that same behavior starts to be very annoying. All of a sudden you're not tolerating that as well and the other person doesn't understand what's going on. They can feel really rejected.

Lee Rosen: So is this the kind of thing that -- you know, some things I think happen over time in a marriage and you'll see problems that come up maybe when kids get to a certain age -- I guess maybe like the empty nest thing or dealing with teenagers. And there are sort of these stages of life driven problems. Is this different? I mean, is this something that could happen right off the bat in a marriage?

Jennifer Coleman: It could happen right off the bat and it can also happen later on. I think it's first of all personality driven, but it gets more extreme over time if the couple doesn't take steps to get things in balance -- their individual circles that you were talking about in balance. So there's the right amount of overlap that feels right to both of them.

And often what happens is if the person who's being dependent is allowed to continue doing that, over time the situation feels more stressful.

Lee Rosen: What if I'm looking for warning signs? What are the red flags that will tell me, look, we're moving -- I guess I wouldn't even be thinking about this if I wasn't a little worried about it, but what are the signs that say you're stepping over a line; these are the danger signs? What do you see in those situations?

Jennifer Coleman: If you are a partner who doesn't have any of your own interests or hobbies or any of your own friends outside of your marriage partner, you need to evaluate what kind of effect that has on your spouse and also on yourself. You may think it doesn't have anything to do with your spouse; it's just a personal decision or a personal choice that you make of how you invest your time and energy. But the truth is, not only does it affect you in your individual but it does affect your spouse.

Lee Rosen: So if I'm seeing that I myself am sort of focusing my whole life on my spouse. I've given up friends. That is my focus. Then I know I'm in trouble.

But realistically, if I'm the guy that's giving up my friends, I don't see it as a problem. I'm not listening to this show. You know what I mean? Because I wanted to give up my friends.

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: So I guess really the danger sign is going to be when that other spouse sees me giving up those aspects of my life and focusing exclusively on my spouse and that relationship.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. I think giving attention to your spouse and focusing attention on them is generally a good thing. Where the shift happens is when your spouse is bearing the responsibility for your emotional happiness; your spouse is the person that you rely on to kind of feel happy or feel worthy or to kind of justify your own existence. Or you can't imagine yourself outside of -- you can't imagine yourself enjoying an activity independent of them, then you've changed something from "we enjoy this together" to "I have to have you to enjoy this." And I think that that is the feeling the spouse that's being depended on starts picking up on and starts feeling resentful of over time.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Now, not that this has ever happened to me, but if you're involved with someone and they freak out at you and they say, "I just need my space," are we in this zone of this particular problem?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think that if --

Lee Rosen: The women I've been with have always -- they've just wanted more of me.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. More of you.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think that if a partner says "I just need my space," and you can hear that and respond to that, you're still in a pretty healthy zone because your partner's able to say what they need and you're responding to it. But if your partner says that to you and you feel this giant need to become leechlike that you really struggle with, or your partner is not able to be that direct and still kind, then yeah there could be an issue there that you might think about.

Lee Rosen: Then we need to start getting worried about it, yeah. So if that person who says "I need my space" starts to pull away, is that sort of inevitably where things -- is that what they do?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, you know what happens is that that feels very frightening to the person who's become somewhat dependent because exactly what they feared is now beginning to happen. They're clinging and becoming -- they're infringing on this person's circle as part of holding them close. What they really want is to feel close to that person 24/7 and now this person is withdrawing from them and pulling their circle away. It's like the worst has happened.

And the ironic thing is that the more the dependent person keeps chasing, typically the more the other person will continue to withdraw. It's like they're causing this endless circle to just get worse and worse.

And so the stopping point to that is for the two partners to be able to sit down and talk about what's going on and each of them ask for what they need and talk about how each of them will be able to get that within the relationship and feel secure.

Lee Rosen: Right. But that's not going to happen very easily. I mean, one spouse is running; the other spouse is chasing; it's getting worse and worse and worse all the time.

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: Sort of a nightmare scenario. It's almost like when you get into that pattern you're sort of -- it feels a little bit like you're destined -- you're doomed because you're doing exactly the opposite of what -- you're saying we need to come together and talk about it and people are likely to be doing the exact opposite of that. They're running away. One of them -- I guess he or she -- one is running away. The other is chasing.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. So they are in a fix. And probably what will happen eventually is that one of them will come to counseling and --

Lee Rosen: To say, "This person is chasing me. I need my space."

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: They just want an hour alone, whatever it costs.

Jennifer Coleman: True. True. They're looking for that. But I think that most people who come in like that really want to save their marriage. An example of someone that I've seen in the past came in to me as an individual because they really wanted to work on the marriage and felt like their personality was completely being sapped up by their partner and that their partner didn't have their own interests. And even though he wasn't ready to deal with that, she came in to talk about how she could affect the relationship. So definitely I think people seek that out.

Lee Rosen: So you think it's more likely in this scenario that one spouse will show up at a counselor's office, not both -- initially, at least?

Jennifer Coleman: Yes. I think it could happen either way. But I think that's most typical. And the important thing to remember is that when people are in this situation -- one person's running from the other -- there's this pursuer, distant sort of relationship going on -- it doesn't mean that the couple doesn't love each other anymore. Typically both people are very in love but they don't know how to change this cycle.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'm off on a little bit of a tangent and I don't want to stay here. But I'm curious, is this the phenomenon that causes people to end up being stalkers, or is that something a lot more complicated?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, that's a good question and it is complicated. But just to address it briefly, I think that these kind of behaviors on a whole different level when they're completely out of control could look --

Lee Rosen: Right. So this is the subtle, easy --

Jennifer Coleman: -- stalkerish.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: But the difference between a stalker and someone that's in, say, a marriage relationship like this is that typically a stalker doesn't have any kind of solid emotional relationship that was there to begin with with the person they stalk. They've maybe admired that person from a distance or gotten these fantastical fantasies about this person in their head that aren't based in reality.

And we're talking about a situation where a couple actually really knows each other well but one person is being stifled emotionally and the other person is for some reason not feeling like they can get enough, which is the commonality part with a stalker scenario: one person can't get enough of this person that they probably really don't know very well but imagine that they do.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Stepping away from stalkers, because I'm getting off-track on that, but who's most likely to show up at the counselor's door, the spouse that is clinging on and feeling unhappy because of the lack of -- the dependence is being resisted, or is that other spouse that wants some space that's most likely to show up?

Jennifer Coleman: Definitely most often the other spouse who wants space.

Lee Rosen: They're most likely to see it as a problem and --

Jennifer Coleman: Yes.

Lee Rosen: -- want to do something about it.

Jennifer Coleman: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: And when they show up, have they usually -- do they figure, "I'm done; I need to get out of here"? Or do they really see this as a situation that maybe -- where are they coming from when they walk in the door?

Jennifer Coleman: Most of the time they see that this situation is happening and they want it reconciled. So most of the time what it sounds like when someone walks in my door is -- okay. I'll just -- it could be either male or female, but for the sake of simplicity, I'm female and I'll say

that probably 80 percent of the times I've seen this the person coming in complaining has been female.

So let's say that's me and I come in. I would sound like, "You know, my husband is the best guy ever. He's the best dad. He's the best father. Anybody else would tell you that he's perfect. But I'm really unhappy and I want something more and I've thought about having this other relationship but I don't want to do that and I'm having guilty feelings about that. And he doesn't have any --"

So when I probe a little more, "Tell me more about that," the person says, "He doesn't spend time with his own friends and when I spend time with my friends he feels like he's missing out. And I have these different hobbies that I want to do but that's disappointing to him. And I just want him to need me a little bit less and to be happy on his own and I feel like then he would be attractive to me."

That's kind of what it sounds like.

Lee Rosen: So when you hear that are you -- I mean, I think sometimes when somebody walks into a mental health professional and describes a problem, sometimes the mental health professional smiles inside and says, "I'm going to be able to fix this one. This is a problem I've seen before. I know the solution. This is a solvable problem." What about this problem? Is this a solvable problem?

Jennifer Coleman: Definitely a solvable problem. And so the first thing that I think of when somebody's telling me this, basically they're saying, "you know, he gives me too much attention." So what's the opposite of that? The opposite of that is, "He doesn't give me any attention. He doesn't notice me. He doesn't care."

Lee Rosen: Right. That would be --

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: My wife would be like, "I got a haircut. No one noticed. Why did no one notice my hair cut?"

Jennifer Coleman: Right. And now he notices every little thing about me and I find that annoying.

Well, "What do you want? Do you want him not to notice?"

"Well, no."

Here's an example. A woman told me that she lost a significant amount of weight -- maybe 45 pounds -- and her husband didn't really notice. And I said, "Well, how do you know he didn't notice."

She said, "Well, because he just loves me and finds me just as attractive in bed before I lost the weight and after I lost the weight and there's no difference to him. He kind of likes me no matter what."

I said, "You're annoyed by that?"

And so that seems kind of crazy, you know?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: But the thing was, she wanted someone to notice that something was different, that she tried so hard to make different because she thought that would be a big thing for the relationship.

So what I'm trying to say there is that it's most often how the person in the relationship perceives what's going on as to whether it's a problem or not. And so the exact level of neediness in the relationship, it's about whether it's acceptable to the person and what it feels like.

So if somebody feels that their spouse is being too emotionally needy on them then I get them to be very specific. So you don't want the opposite of that, but what you're telling me is you want somewhere in the middle. And what would that look like in your life? Would it mean you're doing things with your husband so many nights a week and that once a week you go out with the girls? What exactly is it you want? And then can you ask them for that in an assertive way? And how do you anticipate that they would respond?

So we get really specific about helping that person sort out what exactly is making them unhappy with the relationship between the two of them. And then where is the mid-point? Because the mid-point is different for everyone.

Lee Rosen: Can you get this marriage back on track only seeing one of the spouses or do you need them both?

Jennifer Coleman: The ideal situation is to see both of them. However, often times the other party might feel resistant to that or might not be able to acknowledge that there's a problem at the same time that the person who's seeking help recognizes that there's a problem. And it can definitely be affected by just seeing one partner for sure,

because what you want to do is change the interaction between the two of them. And when you've got one person who's being dependent and the other person who's withdrawing, if one person starts doing that thing less, the other person will typically do it less.

If you think about a relationship where -- say I'm married to you, Lee, and I do all the laundry. I always do the laundry. You've never done laundry in your life.

Lee Rosen: We should get married.

Jennifer Coleman: So what would happen if I just suddenly stopped washing underwear? I just don't wash underwear anymore.

Lee Rosen: I guess I would have no clean underwear.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. But eventually you would stop wearing underwear, you'd buy underwear, or you'd do laundry.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: So what happens is the more laundry one person does, the less the other person does. But if one person, for whatever reason -- say I was disabled and I didn't have the equipment I need yet to be able to use the washer with my disability, you probably would pick up the ball and do some laundry.

So the same thing happens with this pursuer-distancer relationship that the problem is that both people are doing the thing they started doing more. And if either partner starts doing it less, it eventually has an effect on the other person. And that's why working with one person --

Lee Rosen: Can make a difference.

Jennifer Coleman: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very good -- that's a great illustration of the point. That really works and makes a lot of sense.

Well, we have covered a lot of ground. Are there other things that -- whether you're the pursuer or the person who needs more space, are there other things you ought to know about dealing with this problem?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think the picture to keep overall are those two circles that you talked about in the beginning, that we start out in life before we

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commit to our partner as a whole complete circle and that most of us want to feel like we still have those boundaries and those edges of our own circle. And we also want to invest with our partner together and feel unified. So kind of being aware of your own personal boundaries and the boundaries of your relationship will keep you on a healthy track.

Lee Rosen: Perfect ending. Well, I appreciate you being here today. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Coleman: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: And thank you for listening. I hope that you will join us again next week. We would love to hear your comments about this episode or any episode of Stay Happily Married. We get a lot of feedback and it really is very, very helpful. We've set up a listener comment line at (919) 256-3083; you can leave us a voice mail there. Or you can shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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