

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.



## **This Old Spouse: Tips and Tools for Keeping the Honeymoon Glow**

*This is Episode number 17 of Stay Happily Married, and today we're discussing the book This Old Spouse: Tips and Tools for Keeping the Honeymoon Glow.*

*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 and I'm your host. Welcome to the show. I'm here by phone with Sharyn Wolf. Sharyn, how are you today?
- Sharyn Wolf: I'm fine, Lee. How are you?
- Lee Rosen: I'm great. And I'm really glad that you could join us. Sharyn is the author of the book *This Old Spouse: Tips and Tools for Keeping the Honeymoon Glow*. And she has other books, *Guerilla Dating Tactics*, which is so funny to me because I bought that book and gave it to one of the lawyers in our firm as a gift, Sharyn, 10 years ago. And you'll be pleased to know she's --
- Sharyn Wolf: Well, that is cool. And I'm sure that person is happily married with 17 children by now.
- Lee Rosen: Exactly.
- Sharyn Wolf: Or not.
- Lee Rosen: It worked. I mean, it was amazing. And then you have other great books, *50 Ways to Find a Lover* and *So You Want to get Married?* And I know you're everywhere. You're Oprah, CNN, I mean, you are

a celebrity -- you're in the big leagues and we're very pleased you could join us today, so we're excited.

Sharyn Wolf: That sounds funny when you say it because I don't think people's experience of themselves feels much like the way others describe them, but it's nice to hear.

Lee Rosen: Well, when you're hanging out with Oprah, you know you've made it. What I also love -- and you might appreciate this -- is your book, the *This Old Spouse* book, has just come out on the Amazon Kindle, the e-reader, the electronic book reader. And I bought one of those as a Mother's Day gift for my wife just a few weeks ago, so I loved to see it. So I'm going to have to get this thing on the Kindle and borrow the Kindle from her.

Sharyn Wolf: How sweet. You know, I'm used to having a book in my hand, so it's a big leap to read it on the Internet.

Lee Rosen: Well, it's neat.

Sharyn Wolf: That's what we're doing these days.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, let me ask you some questions.

Sharyn Wolf: Sure.

Lee Rosen: I think people really want to know -- people really want to make their marriages work. Obviously they're tuning into this show because that's their goal. That's what it's all about. That's what we're all about is helping people with that. Your book just seems very practical, do-it-yourself, not a lot of hocus pocus. How did that come about?

Sharyn Wolf: Years and years ago I used to watch the TV show *This Old House* and I loved the way they went into a house and there was so much charm; it looked like such a delightful and delicious place to live. And it was really only after you got into it that you discovered that one room was very cold and one room was very hot and the plumbing was installed during the Roosevelt administration, all kinds of things that you sort of knew going in but you don't think will matter, and all the kinds of things you discover after you're there and you want to pull your hair out and you wonder if you made a mistake. I realize that marriage can feel so much like that.

All marriages are fixer-uppers and each one of us individually is a fixer-upper too. So marriage -- the belief is you get married or you work through a problem and you've reached the top of the

mountain. But the reality is, when you reach the top of the mountain and you feel so gratified, you take a peek and there's another mountain right behind it. So marriages are ongoing and require ongoing care, just like houses.

**Lee Rosen:** Right. But, you know, in a house if the sink is clogged I can look and I know the drain is clogged and we need to do something about that. You know, I feel like we don't see those things in our marriages and for a lot of people we don't realize there's something wrong until it's too late. Why is that?

**Sharyn Wolf:** Well, I think there's two parts to that. First of all, you can see the sink is clogged but you might not know what the right tools are to unclog it. You wouldn't be the first handyman to try to unclog a sink with a chainsaw, and I think we do the same thing in marriage.

Small issues that come up day to day don't get handled and don't get taken care of because we hope we'll go to sleep and they'll disappear the next day, or we're very busy in our job and we think we can put them off. And what happens is they just start to build up so what was sort of a little crack in the wall of the marriage, the foundation of the marriage -- if those things aren't dealt with, they build up and they build up and they build up and then you have a big crack in the foundation.

So we don't want to hurt each other and we often don't have the time or the energy -- we're all working long days and parenting -- to deal with the small things that come up and we don't realize what happens if we don't do it.

**Lee Rosen:** Right. Well, all through the book you give examples of couples that have experienced difficulties and ideas about helping them. Where do all those stories come from in the book?

**Sharyn Wolf:** Well, I've been a marriage counselor for 20 years and so that's certainly part of it. And I have watched people get through things -- for example, if a couple comes -- in the past, when I would hear a couple say, "That was a bad year for our marriage," I used to imagine that they meant they had a bad few weeks that they remember. But oftentimes they do mean they had a bad year; the whole year was pretty bad.

And I think it's important for couples to know that happy couples and unhappy couples have the same problems most of the time. It's not like unhappy couples have different problems than happy couples. It's just that happy couples have better tools to solve and sometimes not ever resolve. Happy couples can live with not having

a problem resolved, like a difficult mother-in-law or a job that takes too many hours. Unhappy couples feel they have to solve that problem and sometimes happy couples learn to live with problems.

Lee Rosen: Right. So it's not so much the problem; it's how you choose to see it and address it and deal with it as a couple.

Sharyn Wolf: And what kinds of skills you have for doing that, and also your basic purview of marriage. Do you believe that your foundation is built to last, or are you one of those couples where there's one foot out the door all the time? It's so important psychologically to have both feet in the door.

And it's also very important psychologically to learn that "I'm sorry" only goes so far, that if you injure your partner and you say "I'm sorry" and that becomes the habit that you feel you can injure your partner because you say you're sorry, that you don't realize that if you pull a nail in the wall and you pull the nail out the hole is still there. And that's what happens in marriage. There's only so many nails you can put in a marriage before it becomes a coffin. "I'm sorry" just doesn't cut it after so long.

Lee Rosen: Right. I have a 14-year-old that's always telling me he's sorry and, you're right, it doesn't cut it. And in a marriage it's really a much, much bigger problem, I suppose.

Sharyn Wolf: And a 14-year-old is an adolescent and hopefully as time goes by I'm sure he'll learn. But we're grownups here and we just injure each other all the time and just don't think that much about the impact of our behavior. And I'm sure you have couples come in when they have problems and they can tell you everything that their partner did to make their life miserable. And if you turn to them and say, "Okay. Now I know what's wrong with him. Tell me why you're impossible to live with," they're speechless. They have no idea that living with them is not an easy task.

Lee Rosen: Fascinating. That rings very true to me, too. Very interesting. Now, your book, I feel like, is written -- it feels to me primarily like it's written from a female point of view. Is this a book that works for husbands as well as wives?

Sharyn Wolf: It is, and there's a reason for that. I'm glad you see that and point it out. For example, a book like *Guerrilla Dating Tactics* was very much written as much for men as it was for women. And in fact, men really like that book because it sounded very practical and filled with ideas. And this book, the way that it started actually was

that I had a couple in here and she was trying to talk to him about something and I think I just used the metaphor of a house.

And I guess they were having some sort of problem and she was saying, "You're not communicating. You're not communicating." And he didn't get what she meant.

And I think I just reframed it as, "You feel like there's a wall between you." And that he could get a feeling for, like a wall can come down. But "you're not communicating," he doesn't know what it means.

So the book -- my editor felt that most of these books are purchased by women, and indeed they are, so that while it would have very practical terms that men could use, they felt that the publishing house -- and that's what happens when you write a book, the publishing house and the marketing department decide how a book should be slanted. And so this was written for who they believed would purchase it, but the stories in it and the techniques in it are very much for either gender, or any gender. I live in New York City, so whomever.

Lee Rosen: And really the whole house analogy to me just does resonate for men. I mean, I get that. I used to be a fan of *This Old House*.

Sharyn Wolf: I think it makes it easier to talk -- if I say to a couple, "So how's your sex life and how are things there?" it's not easy for them to talk about. But if you kind of say, "Is the boiler working properly?" couples find that it's sort of easy to take a step away from their very personal feelings and talk about the boiler system in the house.

And I say things to them like, if you've gone to bed in the middle of winter and you woke up in the middle of the night and you were freezing, you'd look at each other right away and you'd say, "I'm freezing. Let's do something." And you'd call someone to make that repair immediately. You would never say, "Hey, let's wait until spring when it gets warmer." You would never do that with your house. And yet with closeness between couples, that's the kind of thing that they do sometimes. "Let's wait until spring. Let's see if there's a change in two months."

So certain things get put off and it's much easier to talk about a boiler system that isn't working right than it is to talk about intimate behavior between couples which can feel critical and frightening.

Lee Rosen: Now, I may never look at my house in the same way again. In one of the chapters in the book you talk about five tools that do-it-yourselfers need. Give us some insight into those do-it-yourselfer tools.

Sharyn Wolf: First of all, most couples work on their marriage themselves. There's treatment available. There's couples therapy available. Perhaps where you worship, if you're a religious person, there's help to be found there. You talk to your friends. But there are certain basic things that healthy couples -- and I won't even say happy, I'll say happier -- there's certain things.

For example, curiosity. So trying to understand what motivates your partner, why he said what he said, rather than condemning him for saying it. It's always wanting to find out more. Tell me more. That's what I say as a therapist all the time, "Say more. Tell me more. Is there more?" And that way you can help a partner to say everything they need to say and at the end of what they have to tell you --

So, for example, simple things. "I don't think you're passionate enough," he says to her. Well, she has no idea, what does that mean? Does that mean he wants to be kissed more often? Does it mean -- what does it mean?

So you have to instead of say, "What do you mean I'm not passionate enough? You're not passionate either," whatever, it's more like, "Tell me more. What do you mean? If I were more passionate, what would I do? What brought that up in your mind?" To have a constant curiosity, to keep your partner talking so that you can figure out what they're talking about because there's really no way to know. And also to develop an empathy, sort of a picture in your head of their psychological landscape. So it's not so much what you'd say if you wanted more passion in the relationship, but trying to understand what he means when he asks for it.

So there are all kinds of basic things you need to bring into a marriage. And, frankly, not just into a marriage, into parenting, into business, into life, there are certain tools we need that mean that we're less defensive and more curious and more empathic so that we're like Sherlock Holmes of our partner's behavior, trying to figure out what it is they need rather than feeling attacked or criticized because they think we're not providing it.

Lee Rosen: So "tell me more" is one of the five tools for do-it-yourselfers?



**Sharyn Wolf:** I think "tell me more" is a big one, which is basically the sense of curiosity -- incredible curiosity about how your partner behaves.

**Lee Rosen:** Well, on these do-it-yourselfer tips, Sharyn, can you tell me more?

**Sharyn Wolf:** Well, okay. Let me give you a couple of things that come to my mind. For example, a couple needs a blueprint for a marriage. You have your idea. Maybe in your head is your idea, well, we'll have two children and when my mother gets old she'll move in and we'll move to the suburbs, X-Y-Z. And his idea is we'll have five children and your mother will never live with us. And you both have separate ideas of how this marriage is going to be run but it's not talked about because none of them have happened yet. I think it really helps to have a shared blueprint of how you will conduct your marriage.

I don't think it's the problems that come up ever; it's how you conduct yourself when you have them. When you're happy it's easy. When there are problems, couples don't often understand that the problem is the place you start working, not the place you stop working in a marriage. So I think another tool is just to understand that the problem is the place you start working and that would be in defining what this marriage is for both of you. What is the shared blueprint that you have for what your lives will be like together?

**Lee Rosen:** Very good advice. Now let me ask you, there is another chapter in the book that is "Five Tools That Do More Harm Than Good," and that really intrigues me. These are things I guess that people try to do to save the marriage, to work on the marriage to make it better, and yet they backfire on them. What are those sorts of things?

**Sharyn Wolf:** The thing that really annoys me is the one, "Don't you want me to be honest?" It's kind of the "my honest will kill you, but don't you want me to be honest?" Where couples feel that they have to tell each other everything but it's not honesty, it's brutality. Because honesty that doesn't have empathy or kindness in it isn't honesty, it's brutality. So I don't think couples understand the difference between honesty and brutality and I think that's pretty important that honesty always has compassion in it; it's not cruel.

I think also relying on childhood behaviors is another thing that can really send your marriage down the tubes. Slamming doors and stonewalling each other and calling each names. And people say, "I don't know what came over me" -- that's another thing, "I don't know what came over me." Well, there was a point where you made a choice to take the low road and to say that something came over you, I mean, I don't know what kinds of cases you have, but for

example, in cases of domestic violence where the partner who is violent says, "I don't know what came over me. It just happened." There's a point where that person decided that that was going to be the next step, violence was going to be the next step.

To say, "I don't know what came over me," is a way of saying, "I'm not responsible for what happened." So I think taking responsibility for your behavior, for your bad behavior -- and certainly your good behavior too.

Also nagging and blame. I mean, you sit there and you tell your partner, "You did this and you that and you did the other thing and that's why our marriage isn't working. And if you would only do this --" do you think your partner is going to hit his head and say, "Gee, you're right. I got it wrong the whole time. From now on I'll live my life in the image that you want"? So it's the constant eroding by nagging. It doesn't work. It doesn't help.

These kinds of things -- kitchen sink fights where no one can stick to an issue. They throw in every egregious thing you've committed since the Carter administration. It's like they can't stick to a topic.

So there's so many behaviors that backfire and the biggest thing about marriage is discipline, learning to contain your feelings and to control your feelings. There's nothing you can't tell your partner if it's said in the right way with compassion, and there's nothing you can't work on if you have the right tools to do it. But the wrong tools and the wrong attitude and the kitchen sinkness where everything gets thrown in can only make a marriage fall apart.

Lee Rosen: Well, it's exciting to me to hear the passion that you have about the things that people are doing wrong, and then you provide them with all these ideas about things that they can do right in your book. It's a very powerful combination.

Sharyn Wolf: Oh, thank you. Well, there's so many things. Just the simplicity in a house of good lighting. In a house you highlight the things that are beautiful in your home and you sort of backlight the dark corners so that what is wonderful in your house is what shows. And I think it's the same thing in a marriage, highlighting the best and the good parts of yourself and your partner and your relationship that are working and understanding that everything can't work that well.

And I think also finding ways to be able to talk about it. In my experience, couples who are having sexual problems, who haven't had sex in a long time, it isn't the not having sex that's the problem; it's the not talking about it that's the problem. It's the not saying, "I



wonder what's happening. We were so close and now we're not. What's changed? What do we do? What makes sense? What do we think has happened between us?" It's being able to talk about things in a useful way that keeps two people engaged with each other and by each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good solid advice. And your book really, I think, just pulls it all together beautifully.

I didn't mention at the outset -- but we should -- that the book is coming out in paperback next month, right? In June, I believe. So that's exciting.

Sharyn Wolf: It's coming out in June in paperback. And the thing I didn't say -- I think I left out -- is that the book is fun. It talks about serious things but in a fun way. It's a fun metaphor and it's fun to talk about power surges and spikes and broken boilers and leaky faucets and talking about things in that way. So there are a lot of fun stories and funny stories because without a sense of humor that sort of is like the umbrella under which we live, there aren't too many parts of life that feel good. That sense of humor that you bring to your marriage, that unique way of knowing each other, and that unique way of being playful with each other is so important in keeping people feeling good about themselves and each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. And your book does that. It really does make the whole topic a lot of fun, where I think a lot of material on this subject is just not any fun at all. So I really appreciate you making that happen.

Sharyn Wolf: Thanks.

Lee Rosen: So all in all, when you look at your whole mission here in writing this book, what's the most important thing, what's the central message? What do you want people to walk away with and be able to change about their lives because of the help that you've given them?

Sharyn Wolf: The thing that comes to my mind now -- and maybe something else would come to my mind next week -- is the idea that this is an ongoing project. There isn't a thing you do and then it's finished. It's an ongoing tinkering, thinking, trying this; if it doesn't work try, that, just like you do in a home to keep your home working and thriving and alive. It's the same way you have to work at your marriage. So that there's always something to do, but that doesn't mean that you don't have a good marriage.

The idea that we can work on something and work very hard on it and it will be imperfect but "he's my old spouse" or "she's your old spouse" and "I want to keep him;" that idea that all of that work isn't going to make it perfect but you don't need it to be perfect to be happy.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Good powerful message. I think people listening to this will very much appreciate your perspective on marriage and making marriage work.

So I really appreciate you joining us, Sharyn. Thank you so much for being here.

Sharyn Wolf: Well, thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: I think it elevates our status to have someone who comes straight from Oprah to us, so we're very appreciative.

Sharyn Wolf: Well, thank you so much. That's very sweet to say.

Lee Rosen: A special thank you to Sharyn Wolf for being with us today to talk about her book *This Old Spouse: Tips and Tools for Keeping the Honeymoon Glow*, which is available now in hardback or in Amazon Kindle format, and it will be out in paperback shortly.

We will put a link to the ordering information for either the hardback or the paperback in our show notes, so check there if you'd like to order the book.

You can also find out more about Sharyn and the book at [www.this-old-spouse.com](http://www.this-old-spouse.com). We'll put a link to that website in the show notes as well. The website has a lot of information about Sharyn's workshops, her seminars, her counseling services. She has a blog there. It's a great site; go and visit that.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. If you have comments about this show or any show we would love to hear them. Please call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083, or you can send us an email at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). Until next time, stay happily married.

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