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Whose Fault is the Affair?

This is Episode number 79 of Stay Happily Married, "Whose Fault is the Affair?"

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 by telephone with Dr. Stephen Frueh. He is a coach and educator who is passionate about helping people make their marriages work.

Now, if you're like me and you're sitting down at your -- I listen to these show so often at my computer and I love to pop open the websites of the people that are on the air. So you've looked at Stay Happily Married; let me tell you a little bit about Stephen's website. It's at MarriageConversation.com. MarriageConversation.com. So feel free to take a look at that as you're listening to us. Now, obviously if you're doing this in the car and listening in the car you'll have to look at it later. I'll put a link to his site in the show notes and you can look at it when you get a chance.

Stephen has both a master's of divinity and a doctorate in clinical psychology. He and his wife Lynn have been married for 20 years. I think that's always a good sign on a show about staying married. They have nine -- count them, nine -- children, 22 grandchildren. They live in Ventura, California. Welcome to the show, Stephen.

Stephen Frueh: Thank you very much. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it?

Lee Rosen: It does. It's a busy life you've been leading.

Stephen Frueh: It sounds like a lot to me too.

Lee Rosen: You're wearing me out just doing the introduction. Listen, we're going to talk about affairs and whose fault is it? And this is a topic that -- well, I guess it's always a current event but there have been a lot of high profile affairs recently with politicians really coming under fire for their infidelities. What kind of couples are most likely to be dealing with the problem of the affair?

Stephen Frueh: You know, I love this question, Lee, because I have just -- in fact, it's at the printer right now -- written my second book called *From Marginal to Magnificent: How to Make Your Marriage Sing*. And in that book I've listed indicators of marginal marriages, which is a good starting point for me. If you can let me, I'll give you some of those indicators because I think it'll set the scene for your listeners.

Lee Rosen: Absolutely.

Stephen Frueh: Marginal -- what we look at out there usually in our field is the marriages that are deeply dysfunctional. I am focusing not on those marriages. Those need to be focused on, but I'm focusing on the -- if you thought of a bell-shaped curve, about 15 percent of marriages on the left tail of that bell-shaped curve would be deeply dysfunctional marriages. On the right tail of that curve would be 15 percent or so of marriages -- what I call marriages made in heaven, marriages that just -- they don't need our counseling services; they are just doing it right and I'm grateful for them.

In between is maybe 65 or 70 percent of marriages that I call marginal. And here are why I call them marginal. Here's a few indicators.

If you do not share a clear, articulate vision for your marriage, it is marginal. If you aren't competent in conflict and cannot embrace it and instead are prone to chronic and repetitive arguments, it is marginal. If the light has dimmed, the energy is low, and interesting conversation is infrequent, it is marginal. If you can't tell me in three minutes' time what your partner cherishes, admires or values about you, it is marginal. If intimate conversation -- spiritual, emotional, psychological, or physical conversation -- happens less and less frequently, your marriage is marginal. If your vows and commitments are not an integral part of your intimate conversations, your marriage is marginal. And last, if you can't tell whether your marriage is marginal or not, your marriage is probably marginal.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, and you say 15 percent -- they've got it going on; they've got it right. Fifteen percent are just deeply, deeply, deeply in

trouble. But this makes sense to me. When I sit here and listen to the list, the seven things, these are themes that I hear that just make a lot of sense. Absolutely. And so your new book is all about these folks that are sort of in the middle?

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. I consider them the pipeline of divorce. Many of them never do divorce but they never do realize the tremendous potential in a healthy marriage. Marriages offer amazing potential for individual growth and development. People don't think of it that way. One of the things that happens in divorce is when somebody is developing individually they frequently think they're going away from the marriage. And we set up a whole program or a whole profile for people to actually integrate their individual development, individual growth and bring it as new life into the marriage.

So what we're looking at is to articulate for people not the normal thing that, oh, my god, we're ready for divorce. I say when a couple's ready to divorce, send them to me because that's when they're ready for a marriage. And a marriage has enormous potential both for individual growth and for intimacy and for community well-being, but mostly it has tremendous potential for making the world safer for children.

Lee Rosen: Well, can't argue with that. So the *Marginal to Magnificent* book, that's going to tell these folks that are in the 70 percent -- that is the program. That's what you're laying out in the book, is that right?

Stephen Frueh: Yes. That's correct.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So it's sort of the step by step here's how you go from -- this really is before you've stepped off that cliff. It's before you're doomed. When you start to realize things are in trouble, here are the steps to take to get out of trouble and to get back on track.

Stephen Frueh: Exactly. And you know, I've had some advice from people who have written successful books who say, you're writing the wrong book because what you want to do is get the people who are in the greatest pain and write a book about marriages that are ready to fail.

I think that we need to address worldwide the marriages that aren't really attending to the possibilities within their marriage because people then think that their marriage is okay and then they're surprised when one person has the affair because that -- that's what we're going to talk about.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: And that usually is the almost too late kind of call to pay attention to the marriage or to give -- what we say, give the marriage a voice.

Lee Rosen: Do you find that it's fairly common that one person knows the marriage is marginal and the other doesn't have a clue?

Stephen Frueh: Well, yes and no, actually. Quite often you'll get somebody complaining about their partner. If I'm standing in the line at a Starbucks coffee shop and I hear someone complaining about their partner, usually I can pick up that they are in a marginal marriage. And if they were to turn around and talk to me about it I'd say, you know, you're actually wasting your breath.

A quick story is a neighbor out here came to me recently and wanted to tell me about the fact that he was getting a divorce. And immediately he started saying, "Well, let me tell you about what my wife does," and he gave me a laundry list of the things that were wrong with her.

And about two-thirds of the way through the laundry list I said to him -- I'll call him Bill -- I said, "Bill, I'm not interested."

And he said, "What?"

I said, "That doesn't interest me at all."

He said, "What are you talking about? I thought you did this for a living."

I said, "I'm not interested in what's wrong with your wife. I'm interested in what you're bringing to the marriage that's making it such that it's impossible for her to be close to you. I'm interested in how you show up in this marriage on a daily basis."

He said, "Well, I'm going to a therapist but he doesn't seem to understand either. I mean, she started --" he went right back into the laundry list.

And I said, "You know, as long as you stay fixated on all the diagnosis and analysis of what's wrong with your partner, you can't move off the dime. There's nothing for her to be attracted to, nothing for her to want to come close to you about. You're just a diagnostician and you're superior and self-righteous and she can't get a handle on how it would be safe to move into a relationship with you."

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Lee Rosen: Well, you're not telling people what they want to hear, are you?

Stephen Frueh: I don't think so.

Lee Rosen: I mean, seriously. You know, that is -- where's the "what's wrong with your spouse and how you can change them so your marriage will be happy" book? And it's a theme I hear a lot. It's like, it's not them, it's you. You've got to work on you.

But, okay. So let's shift gears. Let's talk about whose fault is this affair, because I'm starting to get the feeling that maybe you see this differently than maybe my gut reaction is. Because when I say, "Whose fault is the affair?" I'm thinking, who's naked in that room? That's fairly easy to figure out whose fault it is in my mind. But I'm guessing you do look at it differently.

Whose fault is the affair?

Stephen Frueh: Well, I wrote a response to Caitlin Flanagan's feature article in *Time* magazine in July and she I think did a lot of shaming and blaming of men and made fun of people like Eliot Spitzer and Governor Mark Sanford and those people. And my response was not that these guys are blameless and -- because I don't want any of your listeners who listen to this to get the wrong idea. I'm not saying those guys are blameless and it was the wife's fault. Not saying that at all.

What I am saying is, though, there's nothing in her article that points to the fact that marriage is a collaborative affair. What we do is we collaborate on money, we collaborate on parenting, we collaborate on choice of housing and so forth. We collaborate on many things. But we don't collaborate easily on the quality and the richness of marriage. So that when a high profile person has an affair, it's very difficult to have the conversation that says, hey, who was giving the marriage a voice?

And let's say you're a woman who's married to a high profile politician. What were you doing about noticing that you enjoyed being in a high profile marriage probably as much as he did, and you worked hard to help him get to that place? Where was your work about bringing to him your authority and your wisdom about, "Listen, if we're going to have a high profile life then we better spend twice or three times the energy on the health of this marriage than we would have if you were working at a local factory and coming home at 5:00 in the evening."

Because there are enormous stresses and pressures on people out there in public life or celebrity life, and in that means the marriage has to have a lot more attention than it would have otherwise had to have. And that's a collaboration.

Lee Rosen: Okay. I want to get back to that. Let me ask you this. Are there certain types of marriages, like these high profile marriages or are there other types, where an affair really is just more likely than in the average marriage?

Stephen Frueh: I think so. You know, I do a great deal of public speaking and I've noticed that there are certain people in the audience that will idealize the speaker. Ministers notice this. Celebrities notice this. Anybody in a public role notices that there's a kind of magnetism, there are people -- if you're a man, there are women in the audience that want to be close to the celebrity. They want to get their own feelings of goodness or goodwill or something by being close to that person. That's a tremendously seductive and powerful phenomenon as I see it.

So that if a person comes up to me after a speaking gig and says to me, "Wow, Dr. Frueh, you're just so wonderful. You were just so great. You're so sensitive," I don't take that like, oh, boy. I don't take it that way. I go, "Well, good. Thanks." But I keep moving because it's not about me; it's about what she is creating in her head. It's not about whether I'm a stud or I'm attractive or anything. She has been touched in some way, and that's cool, but that's about her, not about me.

So a person -- a high profile like a political office, I think, would have enormous pressures from a lot of different direction from people who want to identify with them, want to project all their needs for being important onto them, even sexualize those images. And I think it's a much more difficult thing, especially since there's no courses available before you become governor for how to be a governor and stay centered in your marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. But now, so you're saying -- like we take that South Carolina governor case, for instance.

Stephen Frueh: Yes.

Lee Rosen: You're saying that the wife in that case really should have been proactive about the marriage in a way that the typical wife may not have to be because they were in this high profile marriage, right?

Stephen Frueh: Yes.

Lee Rosen: But how's she supposed to know that? I mean, my guess is she's kind of stumbling along and the next thing you know, this guy's running for office. Where's the instruction manual for her that says, you really are going to need to work on and worry about this relationship more than you did five years ago?

Stephen Frueh: That's my life's work. I have a lot of children, as you know. Some are adopted and some are natural. And one of the things I like to do with a young man who's going to get married, I say, "Can you meet me some morning at 7:00?" And he says, "Sure."

And I take him over to the preschool and I say, "Notice these women that are here." And those women at the preschool at 7:00 in the morning don't have any makeup on and they have -- they're moving their kids around and they're not concentrating on looking good or whatever -- looking hot. They're not concentrating on that; they're concentrating on being mothers. And I say to the young man, "This is the woman you're marrying. She is not the woman with the candlelight on her face and the pushup bra. She's not that woman in the restaurant. She is this woman."

So how do we say to, for example, the males of the country, "Marriage is a wonderful opportunity for growth, but don't think for a minute it's the hormonal rush you're in right now; that's an entrée to marriage but that is not the marriage"?

And so the idea of my life's work here with *Marginal to Magnificent* is to -- was to hope that people would get the message that if they're going to become a pastor, they're going to become a university professor, they're going to become a therapist, they're going to become a politician, that we'll get the message out there that, "Look, there's a lot more work for you to do to be successfully married than if you chose a less high profile life."

Lee Rosen: Would you -- when we think about this governor of South Carolina, would you say that that same phenomenon applies -- let's say you're the manager of the Pizza Hut. But in your little universe you are the celebrity to the people that work there.

Stephen Frueh: That's right.

Lee Rosen: You're the big wheel in the Pizza Hut. Does that Pizza Hut manager's wife -- or spouse, I guess, husband or wife is the manager -- do they have the same sort of responsibilities that you're applying to the governor's wife?

Stephen Frueh: If she wants a good marriage I would think she would have what I call "the conversation." She would say to him, "Look, you're going to be elevated and that's going to put additional pressures on you and on me. And we need to get some coaching or some mentoring on how we do this because the most precious thing we have is our love that brought us to that wedding in the first place." And I call that the Garden of Eden of your love.

In order for that to blossom and to grow, we're going to have to pay very good attention. And we're going to have to do more than learn how to communicate, or more than certain basic things that are in all the self-help books. We're going to have to look at a whole model of marriage that makes us really get sober about what we're embracing here. And that's part of the marriage education challenge as far as I'm concerned.

Lee Rosen: So where's she going to get that mentoring or that advice? Where's she going to learn about that? Because it does sound like you're suggesting she needs more than she's going to find on the bookshelf at the Barnes & Noble.

Stephen Frueh: I think so. I think so. And that's our big vision for MarriageConversation.com. And I don't know if I'll have enough years to do what I want to do here, but that is my small contribution to the whole marriage conversation is to say, we need to talk about this differently than we've talked about it for the last 50 years.

And through your website and my website and people who have an ear for this, I think together if we join in the conversation and we have enough conversations we can start to get what Malcolm Gladwell calls "the tipping point." We can start to get enough people talking about it that maybe eventually we'll get it up on the screen of the world so they realize that --

See, we live in I think an old paradigm of marriage. We still live in a '50s paradigm, although we don't admit it. I've just been asked to help a woman who does very high-end weddings -- A Soolip Wedding -- and she -- her name is Wanda Wen and she has come to me and asked me if I would, with her, create a model for weddings that would involve all the ideas of *From Marginal to Magnificent* into weddings. And we've started to write a book together. We started a small booklet first and we're going to write a book. But it's about seeing your marriage as kind of beginning in the wedding. Not the wedding separate, like a big party, and then the marriage; but the wedding really planting the seeds for, in many, many ways, for the quality and richness of the marriage.

So you're asking I think a really big question and it's one I'm very interested in and I would talk to anybody, anytime, anywhere about it.

Lee Rosen: Well, let's say that both spouses have not put the energy into making this marriage work and it's come off the rails and the affair has happened. It's a done deal. What do you do? What is the first step? If you want that marriage to work -- and I see so many people where there have been affairs and they do want it to work. It's not like they're ready to check out, just things have gone badly. What do they do to start healing, to start repairing that relationship?

Stephen Frueh: You know, interesting because I'm a fan of Diane Sollee. I think you pronounce her that way. She has a website called SmartMarriages.com. Are you familiar with that?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah.

Stephen Frueh: Yeah. And that's a conservative approach I think, by and large, to this conversation, and yet I see on there in recent months there are articles about -- from people saying, look, the affair's not the end of the marriage. That's a mistake to make the affair the end of the marriage. Self-righteousness and self-purity and self-declaration is a mistake because the -- I see the affair as the opportunity for the marriage to begin.

And I think you mentioned to me at one time -- you talked about the phenomenon of the identified patient that is an old idea in psychotherapy. And what the identified patient thing is about is if you have, for example, a family of five and the 15-year-old daughter is on drugs, Virginia Satir -- the person who popularized the idea of identified patient -- Virginia Satir said, "Look, I don't want to see just the 15-year-old. I want to see the whole family because we're not going to make her the identified patient; we're going to identify the patient as the whole family."

So if you took that idea -- and I know that you're familiar with it -- you took that idea and you applied it to a couple -- so if it was my wife and I, and my wife had the affair -- the starting point is to educate the couple and to convince them, if possible, that the affair is a collaborative event between my wife and I. I collaborated in that affair just as much as she did.

Now, she acted out, yes. And that's painful and that's awful and that's terrible and we both admit that it's awful, painful, and terrible. But that's the point of grief. Something broke down and both of us are terribly, terribly sorry that something broke down

and we broke our promise. But let's look at what came before that breakdown. Let's look at what I was contributing. Let me look at my coldness. Let me look at my self-righteousness. Let me look at my inability to collaborate with her. Let me look at my abandonment of her emotionally. Let me look at what I call the "100 percent rule." Let me look at how I contributed to that.

And if I take that stance, 90 percent of the time she's going to lose her own fear and she's going to start collaborating with me while I also -- and then she's going to start -- in fact, this is how we teach couples about embracing conflict. We say, if you can take 100 percent responsibility for everything that's wrong in the marriage, and if you can have confidence that your partner will do the same, we have a chance of you having a marriage that sings.

Lee Rosen: See, now, all those people were going to click over and buy your book at Amazon until that. Because here you go again with you've got to fix your own stuff. You make it so hard. But I hear you and it makes so much sense. And the minute I stop blaming someone and start talking about what I've contributed to the problem, you're right, they're going to warm up to the whole situation. I mean, the blaming pushes us apart, but my acknowledging that I play a role in it and that I'm willing to work on that does -- just listening to you say it, I can feel the way that would shift the dynamic.

Stephen Frueh: Shifts it enormously. You know, I'm also a business consultant and I do leadership consulting with businesses across the country. And I have a group out here of about 30 businessmen that I meet with regularly and teach them some of this. And one of the things -- last summer one of the men said to me, "You know, this is a terrible business climate."

And I said to him in front of everybody -- and I know better but I said it just for the shock value. I said, "There's no such thing as a business climate." And everybody in the room looked at me like I was stupid, right? And I said, "Of course I know there's a business climate. But as a businessman running a \$2 to 10 million business, if you think in terms of business climate you're not likely to be very creative or imaginative in dealing with the challenges of your business because you'll be giving up before you start."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: They say, "Well, the banks aren't lending money. Well, people aren't buying. Well --"

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I said, "How come in a business climate like we have there are people in businesses like yours that are making money? How come?"

Lee Rosen: Right.

Stephen Frueh: How come there are marriages that have someone who's not very bright relationally, or maybe has flirted, or maybe this or maybe that -- how come there are marriages -- and I know them -- that have taken on their challenges and marriages that are singing a pretty good song? How does that happen? Well, it happens because both of them are willing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Those people are taking it on themselves and -- yeah. Absolutely. Makes a lot of sense and I keep teasing you that you won't sell any books.

Stephen Frueh: And that's the problem. I don't sell any books. I wish I did.

Lee Rosen: Right. You need the three quick steps to how someone else will solve your problems; that's really the -- or why you can blame your spouse. Really I think that would be the big seller.

Stephen Frueh: Well, in the Sports sections what you've got -- if you look at any Sports section across the country what you've got is ads for hair replacement and ads for how to enhance your virility. That's what you get -- that's what men are looking for, two quick solutions: reverse your baldness and increase your virility and everything is going to be great. It's just a joke. But you're right; that's what the masses at least are looking for.

Lee Rosen: Well, I could listen to you all day. And you really -- you do take -- you turn the world upside down but suddenly you're upside down and it all makes sense. I mean, you do an amazing job of looking at things differently but in a very logical way. It all comes together in the end.

I want to remind people about your website at MarriageConversation.com. What else do we need to know today? We could go on for hours but in a nutshell, anything else we need to know?

Stephen Frueh: Are we done?

Lee Rosen: Well, we're about -- we're half an hour into this guy, you know?

Stephen Frueh: Wow. Well, I didn't pay attention. Here's a couple of things. One would be, if I have just a couple of minutes, take 100 percent responsibility for what you don't bring to the relationship and 100 percent responsibility for what you do bring to the relationship. That's very important.

Find a couples workshop in your area where you can get people who are being real, not ideal, and talking about the challenges in their marriage. It's very, very supportive. No solutions, just to listen to other couples because that gives you some freedom to think, gee, we're not alone. We do couples workshops out here once a month and every single time my wife and I leave the three-hour workshop we say, "Wow. That's some of our issues too." And we're open with them; they're open with us. And so there's a lot of support for a couple if they get involved with other couples. Very, very important.

Revisiting your Garden of Eden is extremely important. You know, the love that got you started in the first place, to kind of go back to that, to remember it, to write about it, to pick up some poems about it, to go see a movie like *Away We Go* -- that movie is a good movie to see. There's a lot of stuff out there that they can reconnect with that love that got them started. I have couples sometimes go through their wedding album and just talk about their feelings around that thing. So they reignite the promise that they gave each other at the beginning.

Our website will have a lot of information for couples and a lot of resources. They can e-mail me; I love getting e-mails and responding to them. You know, those kind of things -- I think what it takes is one or the other of the couple saying, "Look, I want to give some attentiveness like we haven't yet been able to give to our marriage. I want to give our marriage a voice. And are you open to that with me?" And then beginning to learn how to give the marriage a voice. There's three people in the marriage, not two: there's the marriage and then there's he and she and all three have to participate in making the marriage a marriage that can sing.

And at the end of the book *From Marginal to Magnificent* there's a two-page piece on the promise inherent in marriage. And if we had time I'd read it but we don't. But I urge people to get a hold of that and read those last two pages if they don't read anything else.

And the last thing is a friend of mine wrote a book called *We'd Have a Great Relationship if it Weren't for You*. His name is Dr. Bruce Derman. If they would get that book or write that title down -- I have people buy the book and I tell them, don't bother reading it. Just buy it and put it on your coffee table. Buy it and put it in your

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kitchen or your bathroom. Get a hold of that title and look at that title every single day. *We'd Have a Great Relationship if it Weren't for You*, and remember what he's talking about there and that'll help you.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. You have packed in a tremendous amount of advice into this show and I really appreciate it. I want to remind everybody to check out Stephen's website at [Marriage Conversation.com](http://MarriageConversation.com). I will put a link to it in the show notes.

Stephen, thank you so much for being with us today. I appreciate it.

Stephen Frueh: Thank you so much for having me, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Check out the website. Also, the new book *From Marginal to Magnificent: How to Make Your Marriage Sing* is coming out right about now. The first book, which is terrific, you can get more information about that book, *With These Rings*, at MarriageConversation.com.

And that's about all we have time for today. If you have comments about this show or any of our shows, love to hear from you. You can call our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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