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## Facebook Affairs

*This is Episode number 83 of Stay Happily Married, "Facebook Affairs."*

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm really excited to be talking about Facebook. Lots of stuff going on on Facebook. You hear a lot of stories about relationships being rekindled there, and we're going to talk about.

I have on the telephone with me today Sage Navarra. She is a licensed psychotherapist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she specializes in counseling on relationships and trauma, anxiety and addictions; and she knows a thing or two about Facebook, so we're going to be talking about that.

Welcome to the show, Sage.

Sage Navarra: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad you could join us. Facebook is just everywhere. I read the other day that 750,000 people sign up for Facebook every single day. I think I read there are 300+ million people on Facebook. Let's drill down to couples and marriages and all of that. How does social networking -- how do sites like Facebook -- affect couples?

Sage Navarra: Well, you would think that maybe it wouldn't, or how would it be related, but in fact it's changed the way that we relate to each other just in our culture in general and how we seek information. It's always the first place we go and now we're carrying around little computers with us all the time, whether it's an iPhone or a BlackBerry, and we're

working on the computer all the time. So people have accessible to them all of these old relationships that are just at the touch of a button.

And so recently -- in probably the last three years or so -- I keep hearing about Facebook in that this is how people are starting to initiate affairs, really mostly emotional affairs and then sometimes it results in physical affairs later. But it really has to do with just being able to do that. Where we might have had to really seek that out and really work hard, now we can think about when our relationships kind of go off track, well, what could have been? Or what would it have been like if I would have been with so-and-so. And now we can just touch the button and they're right there.

Lee Rosen: They're handy. They're just a click away. Well, do you -- I mean, I'm on Facebook and I'm getting all these friend requests from people that I went to high school with. And sadly -- I'm 48 years old. And I even got my yearbook out and it's like, I just can't remember all these people. I think I lost too many brain cells.

But why is it -- why do people get such excitement? Clearly there's a lot of energy in this whole thing or we wouldn't have all these people signing up. Why do you get so much excitement from reconnecting with people from your past?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think it's so loaded up because if you think about, well, who were you then and how you felt about yourself then, and what would have happened, and what do they look like now? And it might just be curiosity. It can just be really a lot of fun because is this person who I imagined they would be? What's going on with them now? Where do they live? Are they near me?

I mean, it doesn't necessarily have to interfere with your life in any way, but it is really loaded up and sometimes these are relationships that we didn't necessarily want to end. It may have been it was bad timing or people were at different places in their lives and now we can kind of see where they are and it's really compelling for people.

Lee Rosen: Right. How do you think spouses are reacting? If you find out that your spouse is on Facebook and you don't know much about it, I guess -- a lot of people don't -- what is the typical -- what is the spouse who's not doing it assume about it? Do they have assumptions that they make?

Sage Navarra: Well, I don't know that necessarily they make any assumptions. I mean, I think that depends so much on how the couple operates in general. So it's not really -- I don't think there is any one first

response. I think that if there's already some trouble in the couple and people have a tendency to be suspicious of their spouse they might have that reaction. Other spouses might actually encourage the other spouse to be on there.

So it doesn't always start out as something negative or something bad, and doesn't necessarily have to be either. But they might just -- people usually assume that whatever they're doing is what their spouse is doing. So if they're doing it harmlessly and innocently then I think they assume that their spouse would be doing it the same way. And so that's really an assumption that people usually make. And that's usually what happens in couples that can be the biggest challenge in doing couples therapy is that getting the person to understand the other person's perspective and what they would want and need and how they're actually feeling, rather than what you're assuming that they're feeling.

Lee Rosen: So you said something interesting. You said that if one person -- people assume that their spouse is using Facebook in the same way that they are.

Sage Navarra: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So if my spouse comes to me suddenly very worried about me using Facebook to have an affair then I probably need to worry, huh?

Sage Navarra: Well, I don't know that you necessarily need to worry but I think it sort of warrants a conversation because that's raising a red flag for that spouse. And I think that would be a great time to talk about what that means and why that person would be so alarmed or so threatened by that.

Lee Rosen: Do you find that people are generally okay with the whole idea of being on Facebook or do a lot of people feel threatened by it?

Sage Navarra: Well, actually, I think that that is sort of the -- a scenario is sort of a hidden danger. I think that's it, that they're really not threatened by it for the most part, or they kind of override it because they say, "Oh, well, this is no big deal. I mean, I'm just talking to this person online. It's not taking away any time from my family. I mean, that's when my spouse would be asleep anyway." Or, it's not big deal.

And so I think even the spouse that might be engaging in behavior that might not be so great, it's really easy for them to minimize it.

Lee Rosen: Right. It used to be nobody would worry unless their spouse was coming home from work late. You know, "I'm working late," or they

would find that they're hanging out in a bar or something. Is Facebook the new sort of warning sign in your marriage? I don't know. Should it raise a red flag or should you just let it go?

Sage Navarra: Well, I don't think it's either. I think it's really about the state of the couple. But I think that you bring up an interesting point, which is that -- the thing about Facebook is that you're putting up the picture you want to put up. You're writing when you feel like it, when it's most convenient. You're writing what you want. It's a one-dimensional representation.

Whereas even if you are in a bar, I mean, your neighbors might see you. You might be talking to somebody. You might feel sort of more inhibited because you're in a public space. So there is a way that this is sort of insidious because it's this illusion of privacy and it's no big deal and it's just chatting online. And so it can be sort of a little bit dangerous.

If the emotional intimacy that's happening online is more emotionally intimate than the conversations you're having with your spouse, it can be a real problem in a way that maybe going into a bar or a club might not be.

Lee Rosen: Interesting. Do you think people sometimes get more out of these emotional relationships on Facebook than they might by actually having an affair?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think that people -- I think most affairs are -- there's a misconception that affairs are necessarily about sex. I mean, that can be the end result, but generally speaking when people are engaging in emotional affairs they're really looking for something that's missing out of the relationship. And so Facebook --

I don't want to vilify it in any way because it can be really fun and it can be a way actually even to enhance a relationship. If you're sharing what you're learning there with your spouse and it's a way of engaging your conversation or talking about your past, well, that's great. But it can be a way that you can sort of very easily slide into this emotional intimacy with somebody outside of the partnership that can be really destructive.

Lee Rosen: How would you know? Like, I assume you play with it -- you're on Facebook, yes?

Sage Navarra: Mm-hmm.

Lee Rosen: Okay. I mean, I am. My wife is on it. The reality is I don't actually spend a huge amount of time piddling with it, but once in a while I'll go and see all my old high school friends that I don't remember. But how would you know? What would be the warning signs of, hey, this is not right? My spouse is on Facebook and I need to be a little more worried about this than I am. What should I be looking for?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think you kind of just queued into it. I mean, I think the biggest piece with all affairs is generally the spouse's intuition. If we're connected in any, we can feel our spouse pulling away, whether it's sort of emotionally or physically or sexually or you notice changes in behavior. I mean, it may be that suddenly this person's spending a lot more time on the computer and they may or may not be honest about what they're doing there.

And that's the thing that's so strange about this is you could be sitting next to your spouse on the couch doing this and the spouse might not necessarily know. So it's usually more about the feeling and the feeling that somebody might have when their spouse is withdrawing.

And generally with all affairs, or when things are going poorly in relationships, people will often ask their partner, "What's going on with you? Is something wrong? Is there someone else? What's happening?" So there's usually some sense about it. The same red flags you would have for any relationship that's going wrong I think applies to social networking sites or online activities.

Lee Rosen: Have you had spouses that get into arguments about whether the other spouse ought to be on Facebook at all?

Sage Navarra: I don't think it's so much about arguments about Facebook or not. Generally the arguments are implicit in the couple and have been going on for a long time. I mean, generally couples sort of have one argument for their whole marriage and it's really how out of balance they get and how destructive that gets. I mean, sometimes it's silence rather than arguments. Sometimes people resign that they're not going to get their needs met within the marriage and then this becomes a tool for there to be a third party.

Lee Rosen: So if you think your spouse is up to no good on Facebook, that something more is going on there, you've having that intuition, that feeling that this just isn't a good thing, how would you go about approaching your spouse about that?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think having a conversation that's not defensive -- which is really difficult for couples, especially when they're in trouble. But really trying to have a conversation and probably starting with how

you're feeling in the marriage and talking about the marriage in general instead of approaching it in sort of an accusatory or judgmental way. And really trying to listen to what your spouse is saying rather than thinking about what you're going to say or why they're wrong or arguing, but really truly trying to listen. And that can be a real challenge for people.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It is. I'm sure especially if things are already deteriorating it makes it very difficult. If you had it to do all over again -- and I don't know what percentage of us are on Facebook, married couples -- but if you've got a couple that hasn't done it yet but wants to get involved in Facebook and check it out and do all that, are there rules that you might suggest that they agree to before they dive in?

Sage Navarra: I don't know that I would necessarily say that because it really depends on the couple. And rules just -- I think they're just healthy relationship habits in general and that has to do with being clear about what your needs are, taking good care of yourself, supporting your spouse in doing those same things, and having an open dialogue about what that means and how you're feeling about maybe those activities that are online and any activities, really, that are going on in the marriage or in your family or in your lives. The same healthy boundaries and the same community style that I would advocate for in couples in general.

Lee Rosen: So really -- I'm sort of summing up a lot of what I'm hearing from you. I don't feel like you're saying that Facebook or any of these social sites really makes -- nothing is different really about them except that it's so accessible. It's in your pocket. It's on your BlackBerry or your iPhone or your computer that's in your lap all the time now. It's like you have this potential to wander emotionally that you never really had before. It just makes it so easy.

Sage Navarra: I think that's absolutely right. I think it just lends to the sort of impulsivity that some of us struggle with more than others. But it's just right there and so it's real easy to slide into that unwittingly, not even knowing that. And I think the other piece is that it really lends itself to a lot of denial that makes it real easy not to notice as well, which can be sort of dangerous.

Lee Rosen: Right. If I could just remember all those women from high school it'd be right there. But I can't. I cannot figure out who they all are.

Sage Navarra: Well, if you can't then you're probably okay and that's probably not somebody you're going to slide into that situation with. If you don't remember them, it's not real loaded up for you.

Lee Rosen: I guess. I've had a lot of brain damage over the years or something. Let me ask you now, so somebody comes in and -- you have a couple that show up in your office and there has been something going on on Facebook that at least one of them doesn't feel good about. I guess some sort of emotional affair, relationship -- who knows where it's gone? But how do you approach helping them with that problem in your practice?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think I would want to -- one of the first things that I do with people, whether its individuals or couples -- because a lot of times people will come in individually and talk about that this is the activity that they're engaging in.

And so one of the first things is to really encourage them to bring those conversations back to the relationship. So rather than sending off an e-mail or rather than calling this person about how bad things are in their marriage, or even what's happened in their day or what they're excited about, but that they take all of that back to the relationship.

And then sometimes they'll say, "Well, that person doesn't listen to me," or "That person isn't available for that." And then we can begin the real work of, okay, well, what's happening there that that need is not getting met? And beginning to explore those needs and helping people often hear each other. Sometimes I'm just sort of a sounding board but then I can also be kind of an interpreter for people until they can begin to have better tools to be able to hear each other and sort of be hopeful about the relationship and fulfill each other's needs in a more productive way.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. And hopefully you're able to get them back on track and get things going again. Have you ever had anybody where you've simply -- the spouses have agreed to get off of these networks, that just no good was coming from it and they just needed to disconnect?

Sage Navarra: Well, I think that's a really hard thing to ask people to do because unless you're standing over your spouse -- and in some cases I have had people put software on there so they can track where their spouse is going. And these people have agreed to do that.

But we're on the computer so much. It's sort of like people with eating disorders or food addictions. I mean, you kind of can't avoid the computer. And so if somebody's really been engaged in a relationship that was initiated through these networking sites, the person gets suspicious just when they're on the computer. So there are all different ways that couples work that out that feel safe to those parties.

Lee Rosen: Right. Trust but verify. Might need that monitoring software. I hear you. I hear you.

Well, so Sage, my last question is are you going to be my friend on Facebook?

Sage Navarra: Well, you know, I only actually use Facebook -- I worked in student counseling centers for years. And as we know, this is how young people communicate and find each other. So I'm generally just a presence there so that people can find me. So I'm not really engaged in too much of --

Lee Rosen: So in a nutshell, no.

Sage Navarra: That's --

Lee Rosen: Sage, thank you so much for talking with us today. I really appreciate it.

Sage Navarra: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: You can find out a whole lot more about Sage by visiting her website at [SageNavarra.com](http://SageNavarra.com). Let me spell that for you. It's S-a-g-e N-a-v-a-r-r-a dot com. You can also reach her at her office. Phone number there is (919) 929-3717.

Thank you so much for listening to us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd really like to hear from you. Love to hear your feedback about how we're doing, whether we're asking the questions you want to ask, whether we're on the topics you want us to be on. We love your suggestions about guests and program ideas. We try to use all of those. So the more feedback, the better.

You can reach us by calling our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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