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Is Your Family Tree to Blame for Your Fights?

This is Stay Happily Married #85, "Is Your Family Tree to Blame for Your Fights?"

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm glad you could be with us.

I am here by telephone today with counselor Marilyn Harding. Marilyn is in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's a licensed professional counselor and has specialized training in the areas of sex therapy and crisis and trauma therapy. She currently counsels at Life Care Counseling and Coaching and she's a member of the International Board of Professional Christian Counselors. She was also a crisis responder for Crisis Care Network for seven years.

And I always like to know this about the people that we're talking with; she's married. She's been married for 34 years, so that's a pretty good track record. She has three children; they're all grown now.

If you're like me and you like to take a look at the website of the guest while you're listening to the show, and you're somewhere where you can do that, her website is at LifeCareCC.com. So you might want to check it out.

Marilyn, welcome to the show.

Marilyn Harding: Thank you, Lee. It's good to be here today.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited to talk to you. And this whole idea of talking about your family tree, what I think we mean by that is I guess the history you bring to the marriage. I mean, I grew up in a family watching my mom and my dad interact in certain ways and I guess I learned a lot from just growing up in that family. And I'm sure my wife learned very different kinds of things. And I'm guessing, just based on having spent 20 years now watching her family and my family, that that has a lot to do with the way we behave.

So what are you talking about when you're talking about family backgrounds and family trees? Is that what we're referencing?

Marilyn Harding: I think you pretty much hit it on the head, Lee. Our family of origins, the families that we grew up in, are powerful influences in our lives today. Many of us think that when we finally leave home that we're going to forge ahead a new identity and we're going to put in place those things that we wanted in our lives, but then we find later on -- typically in marriage -- that we're pretty surprised to see us acting like Mom and acting like Dad.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marilyn Harding: And then it sometimes collides when our spouse is repeating behavior from their family of origins as well.

Lee Rosen: I tell my wife Lisa sometimes that she's acting like her mother. And that seems to really score me a lot of points. That was definitely sarcastic.

But, yeah, I hear you. And I do think we just kind of -- in the busy rush of day to day life I think things sort of take over. We don't always know what we're doing and things are coming out of our mouths and all that and it's a little bit beyond our control, I guess.

Marilyn Harding: That is true. Most of the time it's unconscious. It's simply because we've been shaped and influenced. And the whole time that that's happening it's not like we're sitting around calculating how we're being formed; it just kind of bubbles out without our consciousness. So yes, those things do make a difference.

Lee Rosen: You know, sometimes I wonder -- family's not just sort of the way we behave but sometimes there's really deep stuff there, like cultural stuff. If you have a very different cultural background or a religious background, do those things come out to create problems as you move forward?

Marilyn Harding: Well, I like the last part of what you said, "Do they come out to create problems?" Because the good news is, is that differences don't have to create problems. And I guess that's kind of the focus of what I want to talk about today, that differences actually can be just seen as unique contributions from two different points of view.

Yes, cultural influences do make a difference; we find that in couples quite often. As well as religious background. I think it really depends on though that the priority that your family of origin places on those values. If religion was something of high priority in the family then it has a higher likelihood of being something that you're going to have to navigate your way through. But there are many families that are religious or have different cultural traditions but they're not as strong as, say, in other families.

Lee Rosen: That makes sense. So even going beyond religion, are there expectations that you come to the marriage with, just based on what you think is normal, I guess? Are there other things aside from religion that cause people to have different ideas about what their marriages ought to look like?

Marilyn Harding: Oh, yes. Some of the most common ones that I see -- and probably for all of your listeners, they can easily identify with this -- is the roles that we assign ourselves in our marriage and also the responsibilities that we think we need to take on.

For instance, did you grow up in a family where it was more traditional with roles of male and female? So for instance, the dad always -- was he responsible for doing the yard work and getting the car fixed and Mom was responsible for doing the grocery shopping and watching the children? More traditional. Versus you may have grown up in a family where there was more of an equal distribution of responsibilities and the roles kind of blended into each other.

And just think about if you marry a partner whose family live very different than yours, then when it's time for the vision of housework or who's going to bring in the money or who gets to stay home and who has to go to work, those are the kinds of things that can disrupt a marriage and have them really not understand what's going on until you can communicate about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's one of those things that I guess your spouse thinks you're just supposed to understand but you don't. Yeah.

Marilyn Harding: Right.

Lee Rosen: Those are tough. Okay. So I can see the things you're saying. We're sort of looking at it from the perspective of going into the marriage. I'm wondering if we look at it from the other side.

Now that you're having -- when somebody comes to you, they're not coming to you because things are going well. They show up in your office because things aren't. Are there classic sorts of situations or scenarios that you see that make you think, "Huh, this really has a lot to do with those differences that this couple had that they may not even have recognized yet"?

Marilyn Harding: Well, some of the more frequent ones that surface are around the areas of finances. And by the way, which I'm sure you're familiar with, that financial problems are the number one reported cause of divorce anyway. How finances are managed in the family has a strong bearing on the couple's sense of satisfaction and being happy. So that's a big one.

Also, power tends to kind of revolve around family of origin issues. Who was the decision maker -- the primary decision maker -- in the home? And that many times we will imitate what we grew up in. So we see that around finances, around parenting.

Parenting as well; that's a big one. What types of boundaries do we put around parenting? Is one parent more lenient than the other, more rigid? And then you marry someone from a different perspective. Again, you're going to have some difficulties.

So really, Lee, the list is endless. And if I were to ask every one of you to sit down and take 10 minutes and make a list of the differences in your background, you could probably come up with them pretty quickly.

Lee Rosen: Right. It really is very interesting. And so all of the things that have happened to you -- which it just seems logical but I hadn't really thought of it before. All the things that have happened to you in the past, and so much of that is what goes on in your family, they set your ideas or your expectations for how the world should work. I mean, that just seems logical but we don't always realize that everything we think has been colored by all of these things that have happened.

Let's say you have a spouse that's in the -- they're angry. They're disagreeing about something. In that argument are they seeing the world differently than one another? Are there backgrounds coloring the way that all of that is perceived?

Marilyn Harding: Well, that's certainly a likely possibility. You know, one of the things that surfaces from family of origin issues is the way we actually handle conflict. Some families are used to coming out of situations where they hit conflict head-on. They take care of it right then. Families can get loud. They can go to the point. And then when it's over, it's over and they move on.

And then you may have someone else who grew up in a family and the way they handled conflict was they just didn't talk about it. They stuffed it down. It was like it wasn't permissible to deal with conflict.

So what happens when you get spouse from both sides of that track coming together? Certainly feelings of misunderstanding and rejection and heightened conflict are going to occur.

Lee Rosen: Right. I have some friends who have exactly that mix and I think it has been very challenging for them to figure out -- because in the beginning of the relationship everything is hunky-dory. You don't have a lot of time to experiment with that level of upset because things are going well. You wouldn't have ended up married if it had been that off the rails, you know.

Marilyn Harding: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, shifting gears just a little bit, what about if the family of origin really has some awful stuff going on? What if that family had abuse or neglect, that sort of thing? How does that color the relationship, the new marriage?

Marilyn Harding: Well, it does have a large impact. And let me take just a second to kind of discriminate between abuse and neglect because they're really two separate things, although they may have the same outcome.

Abuse is something that is done to us. Something happens that shouldn't. And neglect is something that doesn't happen to us but should.

So for instance, we may be in a family where there's verbal, emotional, physical, spiritual, even sexual abuse. Those things happen to us.

Neglect, which is often overlooked -- and that's why I take a second just to do this -- is something that we should have gotten but we didn't. Let's say, for instance, we should have been provided an environment of safety and security, or opportunities to grow and to

blossom through school or other opportunities. Well, either abuse or neglect can leave us operating in a deficit.

Say, for instance, someone comes into the marriage -- let's say it's the husband -- and the couple gets into a problem and the problem needs to be discussed but he shuts down and the wife cannot understand why he won't open up. Well, this particular husband may have grown up in a home where it wasn't safe to share problems or you weren't allowed to have emotions. And so this person -- it's not that they're being intentionally upsetting or angry at their spouse; it's just simply what they bring into the marriage.

And I think so often that's where the problem really springs from. It's not that our spouse is trying to be ugly toward us. It's just that this is who we are. But who we are often times clashes with who our spouse is. And so understanding becomes imperative before we can move ahead and be able to work through these things.

Lee Rosen: Well, when people come to you are they really seeking to understand? Do they get that they started in different places? Are they looking for those answers? Or are they sort of ignoring that and just trying to address the issue that is now at the forefront?

Marilyn Harding: Well, typically when someone reaches out for counseling there's an issue on the table, something they haven't been able to resolve. And while they may be aware of the things I'm talking about if you were to bring them up, most of the time it's minimized and discounted as not being a significant variable in the mix. So that gives us great opportunity to explore some areas that they haven't thought about.

Lee Rosen: It's so easy, at least for me, to think, "Well, my way is the right way and your way is the wrong way." That comes very naturally for me. Is that the case for most people? Is that their tendency?

Marilyn Harding: Yes. And it's because they believe it.

Lee Rosen: Because it's true.

Marilyn Harding: It is true. And it would almost be like being unfaithful to ourselves if we were to admit that another way is right. That's why it's so difficult to stand back and see it with a bigger perspective.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, what happens -- so let's say they're working with you and things are heading in the right direction and you've got this awareness coming for where things -- what they're rooted in and how you came to think the way you think and so maybe you're beginning to address that and all that. But as you're doing that, life

goes on and there are holidays and weddings and funerals and we're going home --

Marilyn Harding: Right.

Lee Rosen: -- back to our family and everybody's getting together for these gatherings. That's got to be -- it's got to kind of jerk you backwards in a way or something, doesn't it? Put you back in your old role or something and screw up the new stuff you're working on?

Marilyn Harding: Yes. And I have to smile when you're even saying that because we are getting ready to approach the holidays. And many times our office gets pretty funny around this time of year because we see an influx of people come who are dreading the holidays with families. And then in January we see another influx of people who are coming to deal with the drama that occurred during the holidays.

So yes, situations from our families are triggers. We go back home and we are in an environment with people that are familiar to us that maybe we haven't been around for a long time. And so it unconsciously taps into a lot of our family of origin issues, stirs up emotions in us and causes us to react in ways that we wonder why we react that way.

Yes, family dynamics are played out in a very visible and tangible way around holiday time. And there are hardly any of us that can avoid being pulled into that drama.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's very tough. It really, really is. You know, when my spouse and I are -- when we're disagreeing about something, rarely do I sit back and I think, "Oh, yeah, she's doing that because of her family of origin." That is just not a phrase that pops into my head during those conversations. And I make certain assumptions about why this is going the way it's going or why she's being disagreeable or whatever it may be, that just don't relate to the things you and I are talking about. Am I unusual in that way? What kind of assumptions are people making?

Marilyn Harding: Well, many times when our spouse is not responding the way that we want them to, rather than considering these family of origin issues -- which, you're right; I mean, who's going to sit around going, "Oh, now what family of origin issue's on the table?" Not likely. But when this happens, many times is that we assume that our spouse doesn't care about us or that they're just being stubborn or selfish, or maybe even self-righteous and unreasonable.

But I have to tell you, the word "assumptions" anyway -- someone once told me that assumptions are the termites of relationships. And of course, we need to remember that because when we are feeling rejected and our spouse is not moving along the way and agreeing with us the way we want it, then it's important that we don't make assumptions about why they are disagreeing with us, but instead that we take initiative to clarify that.

Lee Rosen: And just be direct about it and ask, I guess, rather than assuming everything. That makes a lot of sense. Yeah.

Okay. So you're in the room. And I'm guessing you spend a lot of time in the room with a couple. And it's obvious to you that a lot of what's going on with them is that there are differences in the way that they were raised, that they just come from two different places. What are the steps that you take to help them get on track so that this marriage will survive?

Marilyn Harding: Well, the first thing is that the person has to realize that differences are inevitable in marriage. It's normal. Many times we get bent out of shape because we think we're not supposed to have conflict; we're supposed to think exactly alike, choose always the same things. And that's not true. It's the variety in our personalities and our backgrounds that makes us who we are as a couple. So to acknowledge that that's an okay thing to be different.

And then in working with couples I kind of take a three-step approach anyway from a kind of broad sweep. And the first is to help couples paint a picture of what they want their marriage to look like. Because if we don't know what we want to end up like, then we'll just kind of spend a lot of time and energy aimlessly heading for directions that may not bring us the satisfaction that we desire.

And then once that picture has been painted then it becomes important to remove any destructive patterns of behavior that are keeping us from being able to attain that picture. And of course, these are general terms, but that's where the real work starts. That's sometimes the painful part. But as in any other situation where there's a dilemma, once we start removing the conflict and the problems then we start to feel some relief.

And then the third thing, which is very important -- and I think equally as important as removing the destructive behaviors -- is spending time building up new patterns of behaviors that actually add to the relationship and help create a new relationship and build upon strengths and commonalities. And the commonalities are

things that we can navigate as we get closer to taking away the things that are harming the relationship.

So those briefly, Lee, are just kind of a global picture of how to address some of the concerns that are brought in.

Lee Rosen: When you talk about building these new behaviors, what are you talking about?

Marilyn Harding: Well, finding -- what is our vision? If you work in a corporate environment many times you will be able to read the mission statement or the vision statement of that corporation and it'll be printed in most of its literature. How many of us have a vision or mission statement for our marriage? Where do we want to be? What purpose do we want to serve? How do we want to parent our children? What do we want our finances to look like? Where do we want to serve together? All kind of questions.

And then allowing couples to find things that are exciting to them. Obviously we can't do everything that we would like, but finding the energy and the passion and things that are in common and working towards those, and building good things back into the relationship, finding happiness and becoming good friends, which is very important to the quality of a marriage.

Lee Rosen: I've met a lot of people -- I actually talk to some at weddings who -- you know, they've said things like, "Oh, these two are so different. Their families are so different. Their backgrounds are so different. It's just not going to work." It's a perky crowd I hang out with at weddings.

But you sound pretty optimistic. It sounds to me like you think that people who have very different families or origin can make it and that they can make the marriages happy. Are you as optimistic as I perceive you as being?

Marilyn Harding: I think we have to be. I mean, this is our reality. And besides, if we married someone exactly like ourselves, life would be pretty boring in the long run.

Do you remember the show, Lee, called *Dharma and Greg*?

Lee Rosen: Oh, yeah.

Marilyn Harding: The sitcom?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marilyn Harding: I think that's such a great example of what we're talking about. You could probably get no more polar opposites than these two people and yet we see in them something that was very strong. And each of them obviously had to compromise, but one of the things that you see -- or that we saw in that couple -- is they actually really liked the other person. Maybe they weren't like the other person, but they liked their partner. And that's very important. And those are the things that we can build on.

Lee Rosen: That's fantastic. Well, Marilyn, thank you so much for being with us today. You've given us some great advice and I really appreciate your help and your insight.

Marilyn Harding: Sure. I've enjoyed being with you today, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You guys that are listening, you ought to go and check out Marilyn's website. It's at LifeCareCC.com and a lot of interesting stuff there. And there's a lot of information about their practice, about Christian counseling, upcoming events that they've got for Life Care Counseling and Coaching. So go ahead and visit the site. I think you'll learn some things that will be helpful to you.

And I appreciate you joining us today and listening in. We do these shows every week and one of the best parts of it for me is getting your feedback and your ideas about the show. I love to hear what we're doing right, what we're doing wrong, what we could do differently. You've given us some great ideas for guests and for subjects that we ought to cover.

If you'd like to give us some more feedback, we'd love to hear it. The number that you can call is (919) 256-3083; you can leave a voice mail there.

Or you can send an e-mail to comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I hope you've gotten as much out of today's show as I have.

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

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