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Going Back to School Without Putting Your Marriage in Detention

This is Stay Happily Married #86, "Going Back to School Without Putting Your Marriage in Detention."

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. Nicole Imbraguglio.

Nicole practices with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina and she helps adults and children with a whole range of emotional issues. She's provided counseling for individuals, groups, couples, and families, with problems from mood disorders to substance abuse to life transitions. She has a master's degree in community and clinical psychology and a doctorate in clinical psychology. She has been with us before.

Nicole, welcome to the show.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm pretty excited to be talking about this whole going back to school thing. It seems like I have friends left and right that are going back to school and I do think that that really is an issue for --

Nicole Imbraguglio: It is.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Nicole Imbraguglio: It's a lot -- a lot of that's going on right now for sure.

Lee Rosen: Well, and it's tough on marriages. I think about going back to school and it just wears me out to even think about it.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. I agree.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I just -- tests and studying and -- oh, my goodness. I just --

Nicole Imbraguglio: It's a completely different way of life for sure.

Lee Rosen: Now, who is it that's likely to go back to school now?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I think there are several groups that we're seeing of people who are going back to school now. I think that with the economy that some trades -- you've seen a decrease in the need of some trades, like, for example, for construction. So maybe people have seen a decrease in jobs in their field so they're going back to school to learn a new trade.

Or people who have been laid off and kind of needed that extra push to go back to school. Maybe they had a really well-paying job and kind of got complacent but they'd always wanted to go back to school they're kind of using being laid off as a positive to really do something they'd rather be doing.

Lee Rosen: So you think it's mostly driven by the economic environment today? Is that who most of these people are?

Nicole Imbraguglio: You know, I can't say for sure. But I do think that when the economy is bad it kind of acts like an amplifier for all your problems. So if someone was just kind of bothered by their job before, when the economy is bad everything seems so much worse. So maybe it's kind of grown to, "I really just can't take this and I need to get into a different field."

Lee Rosen: Now, we talk about the whole going back to school. And so on the one hand you have a lot of people that I think are leaving their job and going to school full time. But it also seems like at least one of my friends is doing an evening program, so they're really adding a lot of -- their life went from kind of being laid back to being just crazy.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: You're seeing both the part time and the full time?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yes. I think when people who can't afford to do a full time program they are doing the part time as well as working, which I think when you're choosing that you're doubling your stress. For people who are able to just go to school full time I sometimes see that that's an easier transition to make.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, what are some of the first problems you're seeing crop up in marriages when people decide to go back to school?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I think the first thing that usually happens is the partner who isn't in school kind of starts to pout. You know, they right away feel that they don't have as much time with their partner and they're missing that. So even if the couple did a good job of kind of preparing and talking before going back to school about what it was going to be like, there's still that kind of grief and sadness of the partner who isn't in school just really missing the partner who is in school. That's kind of the first thing.

Lee Rosen: Grief and sadness sounds so much better than pouting.

Nicole Imbraguglio: I think that you can be prepared as possible for it but when you're actually in it you're kind of taken aback by how much you really miss your partner because they have so much other stuff going on. And then when you add the extra household and parenting responsibilities on top of that partner, then sometimes if you're not prepared the resentment can kind of grow.

And then any time that the couple is under more stress you're going to see a decrease in intimacy and affection.

Lee Rosen: Right. What about -- you know, you've got to pay. The friend that I've got, the one that just started back to school, is going to a private college in the evenings. And my impression is that it costs a small fortune. That's got to put some stress on the family.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sure. Absolutely. Any time when money's tight -- like I said, money kind of makes other problems kind of amplified. So hopefully, though, people typically do a better job preparing financially for this transition than they do kind of mentally or kind of in an organization kind of way. So hopefully the family has already kind of come up with a new budget for either living on one paycheck or living on one paycheck and student loans.

But there's some families who are almost just as well off when they include fellowships, if you have a fellowship during school, and student loans.

Lee Rosen: Right. It makes sense I guess if you know how to wheel and deal through the financial aid process you might do very well with it. You do --

Nicole Imbraguglio: Most likely you are going to see a decrease in the kind of luxury items. So maybe your vacations are going to be different. Maybe going out to eat is not going to happen as much. Which does complicate matters because these are things that people typically find relaxing, and making time for relaxation is really important during this time. So you just have to get more creative with how you're going to relax. So maybe you do things that are cheaper or free, like walks with the family or picnics or something like that.

Lee Rosen: You mentioned for that spouse that's not in school that intimacy might suffer and they may feel some grief or pouting, whatever it is. But I would guess there is some other fallout, that that person starts to have other issues with -- I don't know -- just like dealing with kids if they have kids and that sort of thing. Do you see other issues popping up for the non-student spouse?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, sure. I think that one thing that people can be surprised about is how isolated they feel, because their spouse in school is learning a whole new language; a whole new philosophy sometimes, depending on the program; they're making new friends; like, there's a lot of change in the spouse who's going back to school's life. And the spouse who isn't in school kind of feels isolated from that. And I think that people have kind of been surprised by that.

So it's important for the spouse who is in school to kind of share what they're learning in kind of a general way to -- if they're learning new world views and so the couple can grow together in kind of this new idea instead of having the spouse who isn't in school kind of feel like they're on the outside.

Lee Rosen: That's very interesting you talk about the isolation. At some point early in our marriage my wife was in school and she was getting her Ph.D. in English literature. And I remember her having all of her friends over from school studying and stuff. And they were -- it's like they were speaking in a secret language and throwing around all these literary terms and -- it really is -- you do feel like you don't really get it, whatever it is they're up to.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: That is very interesting. I never would have remembered that or thought about that if you hadn't mentioned it, but I think it really does have an impact. It does make you feel a bit like an outsider.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Mm-hmm. So it's important for the spouse who is in school to kind of be aware of that and include the spouse who isn't in school in their life in that way. So if there are going to be kind of social events, that the spouses are included. It's really important for the spouse to go so that they feel a little more included in kind of this whole new world that their spouse is involved in.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Nicole Imbraguglio: But I think as far as other problems that the spouse who isn't in school can face, I mean, there's -- you can count on less time with your partner and more responsibility with parenting and household chores. I mean, that's just a given.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Suddenly the other spouse is too busy to do the dishes or help with the laundry or -- they have to study. I mean, they really do. They're taking on this big thing. They've got to do it.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. So I think the first hurdle with that is just to accept that your life is different now. The distribution is different. It reminds me of -- I had a friend who went back to school after being married for -- she'd been married for I think like 20 years. And so her husband, on the first Christmas that she was in grad school, gave her a little bell that she could ring when she needed something from him.

And it was kind of a joke but I was like, you know what? He really gets it. He gets that things are different now and that for this transition time that he is going to have to do a little bit more around the house and for her than he normally would.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I didn't give my wife a bell.

Nicole Imbraguglio: He's probably the exception, right?

Lee Rosen: "Ring this whenever you need me." Yeah. That was not my overall attitude.

Okay. So we've talked a fair amount about the marriage and sort of the fallout in the marriage and the fallout for the spouse that's not going to school. I would imagine there are issues that -- it's

not all happy times for the student either. That's a tough job being a student. What's the fallout there?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I would say -- you know, I think it's typically different from transitioning to a new job. I mean, it's a whole lifestyle change. As we talked about, there's new philosophies and kind of -- sometimes different world views. And so I think the spouse who is in school has to try to figure out how to fit that into their life already, like making sense of these kind of two things.

You know, it often means being in class for most of the day and then having to come home and do reading or writing for assignments in the evening. So you have a lot less time for yourself. It's very easy to feel overworked there. And on top of that, then they feel guilty that they aren't able to spend as much time with their family.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do things sort of deteriorate at a practical level? Do you see that in couples where they just -- so all this stuff is happening, they're feeling the way they're feeling, but do you see a breakdown in sort of getting stuff done around the house and dealing with allocating chores and tasks and all of that?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I think that you can have a plan about how you're going to do it but it needs to be re-evaluated pretty much on a weekly basis. So it's really important to keep communication open at this time. Or maybe you thought that this plan that you had at the beginning of the semester was going to work beautifully and it's really not. So that's okay; you just need to -- the two of you need to come together and figure out a new plan and get things done.

So I think having a weekly planning time would be really helpful there so that way you're both checking in with each other about how things are going, how you can do things differently. And school schedules change so much and assignments change from week to week, so having kind of a weekly planning session -- it could be just 30 minutes -- just to check in and say, okay, so what is this week going to look like? Who's going to cook dinner on what days? Who needs to pick up the kids these days? Really having just an idea of the week.

And then also during that time you can plan when you're going to have your couple time. And some weeks you may be able to have more couple time than others but always making sure that you're scheduling in a time just for the two of you to spend reconnecting.

Lee Rosen: That makes sense. Yeah. That way you're sort of forcing yourself to keep those lines of communication open and to address these issues before they become a conflict.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Exactly. And you should treat it just like if you were scheduling a meeting with your advisor. It's sacred. It cannot be moved. You have to get it done.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. So are there special things that -- like, aside from -- like, if I'm the non-student spouse, I'm the one that's still working and not going to school, are there special things that I ought to be thinking about and focusing on other than getting my spouse a bell? Because I'm just not buying that one.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I think that being really aware of when you are feeling neglected and being able to express that in a request instead of a complaint. So that would be really helpful. So instead of saying something like, "You never have time for us anymore," putting it more in the form of a request like, "You know what? I would really like to take the family to the park this week. When would be a good time to do that in your schedule?"

Lee Rosen: Okay. Got you.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And also keeping in mind too that this temporary. This is not going to be for the rest of your life. That this is two, three years, four years, and that you really -- it's not going to be forever that you're going to be kind of in this crisis kind of mode.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Only three or four years. It'll be over tomorrow. No, I hear you.

So what about if you're the student? What things should you be doing and thinking and being proactive about so that you don't end up with a degree but divorced?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Exactly. Yeah. And the stats on that are awful. So it's really important for the person who is going to school to really stay on top of their assignments. So that way when you are having kind of those planning meetings, that your spouse can count on that that's as much as possible how that's going to work out for the week.

So try and stay on top of your assignments as much as possible so you don't have to blow off plans with your family that you made because you waited to the last minute to study.

Do everything you can to keep that designated family time sacred.

And finding ways to multitask. So it may be you do your homework while your kids are doing their homework so at least you're in the room together and kind of working on something together.

Or incorporating your family into studying. Maybe you can have your spouse run through some flashcards with you. Or maybe in order to do more stuff around the house you record yourself reading notes and then play that for yourself while you're cooking or cleaning.

Lee Rosen:

Right. We've been involved in a lot of situations where people have done these executive MBA programs where they go away every other weekend to the school and spend the night and then they have a lot of group work during the week and they're really -- it's hardcore for almost two years. And that seems to just be really tough on marriages.

You just said the stats are terrible. What are you talking about? What do you know?

Nicole Imbraguglio:

Well, as far as -- generally -- I know when I was interviewing for grad school I had -- a lot of people who'd interview me would tell me that, "You know the stats on relationships lasting through grad school are awful?" And it's because I think that grad school is a time where people are growing. And if you're not careful, the two of you can grow apart.

But it's not impossible. There are people that -- my friend with the husband with the bell. They came out I think even stronger after grad school because they really got it. They realized that this was a time where she was going to be learning a lot of new things but that he could be there with her every step of the way and become closer in the end.

Lee Rosen:

Right. I do see a lot of situations -- especially we have so many medical students at UNC and at Duke where they finish their residencies, especially, and they're ready to start working. And I think there's so much change -- like you said, they've been growing, they've been learning, and now they're about to start what they perceive I guess as their brand new life and it feels like the right time to trade in their spouse for a better model or something. And it really does feel like a very vulnerable time when there's that much change going on.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. It really is. And I guess if the weekly kind of planning session and couple time isn't working then it's always good to maybe have a couple therapists on hand where you can be checking in. Maybe you're just going once a month, but just like having that kind of check-in time with a third party to make sure that things are going well.

Lee Rosen: Well, given the statistics that you're talking about it seems like it would be a worthwhile investment just to have somebody on the team, because the last thing you want is to go through all this work and all this stress and all this reallocating and bell-ringing and everything else and then have the relationship fall apart at the final moment. I mean, that would defeat the whole point of kind of advancing the cause of the couple.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yep.

Lee Rosen: It seems to me that you ought to be doing -- applying for school and hooking up with the marriage counselor at the same time so you've got all issues covered.

We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else that we need to be thinking about if we're going back to school?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, you know, when I started grad school one piece of advice that was given to me that I thought was really helpful was that it's a marathon, not a sprint. So that you need to find a pace that you can maintain for the whole program. So I would offer that advice to couples who are doing this, that this is a marathon; it's going to take a while. Granted, it's temporary, but it's still a marathon. So what can you put in place that is going to be a pace that you can maintain?

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Good advice. It absolutely is a marathon, not a sprint.

Well, Nicole, I appreciate all your good advice and help today. Thank you so much for being with us.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: You can learn more about Nicole's practice and a lot of good information at the website at Lepage Associates. Let me spell that for you because I think it's a little tricky. It's L-e-p-a-g-e Associates dot com. You can also reach her by telephone at (919) 572-0000. Whether you're going back to school or just facing

some other issues in your marriage, I think she does a great job and is a big help. So you ought to give her a call.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I appreciate you being with us. We'd love to hear your comments about this episode or any episode. You can reach us at our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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