



An Introduction to PAIRS

This is episode 88 of Stay Happily Married, "An Introduction to PAIRS."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I have on the telephone with me Dr. Susan Orenstein. She's a licensed psychologist with a private practice in Cary and in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Now, we are going to be talking about something called PAIRS. And I don't know much about it, but I think you will find it very interesting.

Several years ago I read an article in the *New York Times* about PAIRS and about some other kind of marriage counseling program. And they were talking a study that had been done that said that programs like this worked and that traditional marriage counseling really didn't work, or at least didn't work nearly as well. So that really got me thinking and wanting to dig into this and learn more about it and so that's why we've got Susan here.

Susan, you've been with us before. Welcome back to the show.

Susan Orenstein: Thank you. Nice to be with you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm pretty curious about PAIRS because I have heard that it really does make a difference in terms of helping people figure out how to stay married. And I want to sort of jump right into it. I know that this is exploding in popularity. Give us a little background. Fill us in on what the goal is, what the course is; how does this work?

Susan Orenstein: Okay. A little bit of background is that this -- PAIRS is a workshop that has developed due to Laurie Gordon's work, who's a psychologist who came up with this program originally 30 years ago and taught it as a course -- a semester-long course. And then over the 30 years she's been developing this and getting feedback from hundreds and hundreds of couples so that it's improved and it stays current with current research. And now it's being offered as a workshop instead of a course.

And so how it works is that couples can sign up to come to my workshop. It's an all-day Saturday workshop. And they come in together and with other couples learn some really helpful concepts and tools to stay close, to confide, to manage conflict and to add intimacy into the relationship.

Lee Rosen: So who does this work for? I mean, is it going to work for somebody that -- for a couple that's really in big trouble or -- who is it aimed at?

Susan Orenstein: The couple is -- I'm sorry. The workshop's aimed for couples in various stages. And so you can have a couple that's maybe a premarital couple who wants to get a sense of what marriage is like and what tools they need. Then you can get couples who are going through current stressors, like maybe they have special needs children or they have in-law difficulties and it's just putting extra stress on their marriage. And then it can also be for couples who are really struggling and on the brink of divorce.

And so it can be for folks who just want that tune-up or boost or the folks who are really depleted. It's meant to be for all couples. And what's really nice is to have that diverse group of couples helps to have people learn from each other at different stages in their relationship.

Lee Rosen: So it's a group. You're in a room. Typically how many people are in a program like this?

Susan Orenstein: Typically somewhere around 8 to 10 couples, give or take.

Lee Rosen: Eight to 10. So you're 16 to 20 people in the room, plus an expert like you helping to run the show. And so you get there at like -- you said yours is on a Saturday. What time of the morning do you show up?

Susan Orenstein: I show up at 9:00. Well, actually, I would show up a little bit earlier to set up but --

Lee Rosen: Right. But we show up at 9:00.

Susan Orenstein: -- the program starts at 9:00.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And we're there until -- how long does it go?

Susan Orenstein: Till 3:00.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And it's not one of those things where you don't let us go to the bathroom.

Susan Orenstein: Oh, my gosh. No. It's an open-door policy. You don't even have to raise your hand.

Lee Rosen: And so we're in a room with all the other couples. We're all interacting together all day? Is that how -- how does it go down?

Susan Orenstein: So there are breaks. There's a lunch break. And it's meant to be really comfortable, really light, for people to feel safe, to have fun.

What happens is typically I will go over some concept about relationships, like about true giving or how to effectively listen or how to effectively have a fair fight. So I will give a mini-lecture. I mean, I really don't like to do that, so it's pretty brief. And then I demonstrate an exercise.

Because what I love about PAIRS is they give you tools and exercises. And so I would demonstrate a tool for safe confiding and then I would let the couples practice it in their dyads. I could go around and coach and give feedback, but when they're talking to each other in couples they have that privacy. And then we come back in the group and share what the experience was like.

Lee Rosen: Are you always working with your partner or do you ever get mixed up with other people?

Susan Orenstein: I would say you're almost always working with your couple. At the beginning there are a couple of group interactive activities so people can learn about their conflict style and how they handle conflict. But it's really fun. It's not meant for people to go into really deep personal things. But when you want to talk about really private issues then that's always just with your partner.

Lee Rosen: Now, this is probably overly anal but it's just addressing my own anxiety about things like this. So you said there's a lunch break. Do you go off for lunch or do you have lunch there where the program is?

Susan Orenstein: That's a good question. We are in Cary, across the street from Trader Joe's. And so there are a lot of little restaurants across the street. There's a Gregory's, a Chili's, several places across the street. And if people would rather bring their lunch, we have a big kitchen area or the conference room.

Lee Rosen: But it's basically a lunch on your own kind of thing.

Susan Orenstein: Right.

Lee Rosen: So you're not continuing to keep going around about the issues with the group. You're --

Susan Orenstein: No, no. If people want to say, "Oh, my gosh. Let me clear my head and have lunch and not talk to anybody," they can do that.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Interesting. So what kind of issues are people focusing on in the program? What are you working on?

Susan Orenstein: We're working on skills so that when people bring in any kind of content they have new skills. And so, for instance, there's a tool for daily connection. And with that tool we talk about how to share appreciation and acknowledgement and bring up concerns. And then when we break up into couples, they can talk about absolutely anything that they want. So the content isn't really so much important as really getting those skills and that tool.

Lee Rosen: So you're learning -- you're able to take these -- you're doing these exercises, you're taking what you learn and you can now use it at home because you've practiced it.

Susan Orenstein: Right. And so it really is different for couples because I think so often people get stuck with the content. And this is really not about the content as much as a format. And so you have a new format, you have a new experience talking about whatever that content may be, and often that content just kind of has a new feeling about it. People have a new feeling and then they can get creative and then they can come up with new possibilities.

Lee Rosen: So now, do you have to -- back to my anxiety about this sort of thing, do you have to share -- "sharing." It sounds like a very mental health word, doesn't it? Do you have to tell people things about -- do you have to give them personal information in front of the group? Am I going to have to say, you know, "My wife thinks I'm a jerk," or whatever it is?

Susan Orenstein: I am so glad you asked that question. Absolutely not. Not at all.

Lee Rosen: Well, then that sounds fine.

Susan Orenstein: I mean, that's another thing I love about this group. It's not group therapy; it's really a workshop. And you can have 100 percent confidentiality and privacy and I think some people can learn so much, even if they don't want to share anything about themselves with the group. Just being able to absorb and learn these new skills through these exercises will be tremendously helpful.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it does -- I mean, the average guy is a little worried about this being too much of a kumbaya kind of experience, everybody holding hands and singing together. So that does sound a little -- pretty comfortable.

Why does this work? I mentioned at the opening of the program this study that I read, that this thing really does work very well. Why is that? Because it doesn't sound that hard. For me showing up it kind of -- I get to go to lunch and I don't have to tell my inner secrets and -- what makes this thing effective?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I think I'm helping people develop an atmosphere in the workshop and when they leave the workshop that they can talk about sticky things in a whole different way, that we can add the piece about appreciation and trust and comfort and humor. And so what I hope is that people take home those feelings and that experience and then they're not so afraid, they're not so uncomfortable and feeling like they're walking on eggshells at home, because they've had an experience of success in the workshop.

So I set people up for success. And again, the way we do it is we really get people to learn how to be comfortable, how to face each other, how to create the mood, create the atmosphere where they can actually confide and listen and hear each other with an understanding, as opposed to fighting and hurt and --

Lee Rosen: Right. I suppose this is not the kind of thing that works if your spouse says, "Fine. You go but I'm not going."

Susan Orenstein: Good question. You couldn't do the PAIRS exercises if your partner didn't come with you.

Lee Rosen: It seems like it. Yeah.

Susan Orenstein: That would be tricky. What I would say is I would invite people to come if they wanted to come, let's say, with their sister or a neighbor or a friend and they could get some tools and practice it with somebody else.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Susan Orenstein: And then they may be able to go home and be able to share that with their partner if their partner was really disinclined to do something like this.

Lee Rosen: Got you. Yeah. That'd be tough but, yeah, I hear you. What does this cost? This is a one-day thing, just Saturday. What is the fee for something like this?

Susan Orenstein: It's \$245 for the couple for the whole day.

Lee Rosen: Oh, gosh. That's really reasonable. Yeah.

Susan Orenstein: One of my motivations for doing this was to be able to offer this for folks who had fewer resources and also couldn't make it to a regular, traditional counseling on a week-to-week basis. So the idea was to make it affordable and make it on a Saturday.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And for some -- you could spend a chunk of that on one counseling session, so that really is an amazing opportunity. I mean, from everything I've read this just seems to be the thing that -- everybody's loving this. At least, a lot of the research is loving it. So it seems like it'd be worth a try.

Now, you're doing -- you have a course coming up, I assume? I mean, my -- correct me if I'm wrong, but these PAIRS courses are going on all over the country -- actually, I guess around the world in lots of different countries -- all the time. Right? I mean, it's a pretty common -- this is a big operation, PAIRS, right?

Susan Orenstein: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. You're offering a program. When is your next one?

Susan Orenstein: It's January 9th of 2010.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Right. Perfect holiday gift. You could buy your spouse -- the two of you could go together to this. That would be a terrific thing to do, actually.

Susan Orenstein: And what I -- I'm sorry.

Lee Rosen: No. You go.

Susan Orenstein: The other thing I like about it is you can share it with your family. And so these are tools that you can share with your kids, with -- we've taught our kids some of the talking tips, some of the ways -- there's an exercise that I really, really enjoy. It's called the daily temperature reading and we share that with our boys. And so it's not just to share with your partner, but also it's something you could bring into the workplace, you could bring into your home life.

Lee Rosen: Right. I don't know that I want to give my kids any talking tips, but the other stuff sounds good. A little less talking would be fine. I don't know what happened to that "seen but not heard" thing, but it didn't work out at my house.

Susan, anything else we need to know about PAIRS? It really does sound like a great opportunity for folks to do something without a major investment of money or time. I mean, it just sounds like what a great way to get your marriage -- help to put it back on track. Anything else we ought to know?

Susan Orenstein: I think back to your first question of who is this for? So I think for some couples who want the skills and the tools, they can come have the workshop and then leave. But I think it's also for couples who may be in couples counseling now as a boost so that they can get some skills and then go back to their couples therapist and show them the tools and be further along.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Susan Orenstein: So if folks are feeling a little stuck in couples therapy, this might be a way to get them out of a rut and move forward.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. So the next one you said is January the --

Susan Orenstein: Ninth.

Lee Rosen: -- 9th. Okay. And for more information I guess we come to your website at OrensteinSolutions.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. That's O-r-e-n-s-t-e-i-n Solutions dot com. And it sounds terrific.

Susan, I appreciate you coming and filling us in on how all this works. Thank you so much.

Susan Orenstein: Oh, thank you for having me. And I hope I can convince you to come to one of the workshops, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Well, now that I know that I don't have to share and I get lunch, it just sounds perfect.

You can find out a whole lot more about Susan and her practice. She has a website, as I mentioned, at OrensteinSolutions.com. You can also call her offices -- they have offices in Chapel Hill and Cary, North Carolina -- at (919) 428-2766.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We love to hear your comments. If you have anything you'd like for us to hear, give us a call on our comment line at (919) 256-3083. Or you can shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

Until next time, stay happily married.

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