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## On the Brink of Divorce

*This is episode 92 of Stay Happily Married, "On the Brink of Divorce."*

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm have on the telephone today marriage and family therapist Liza Shaw.

Liza is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a certified advanced clinical hypnotherapist. She practices in Hickory, north Carolina. She had two young sons and I am glad that she can join us again; this is the second time she's been with us.

But welcome back, Liza.

Liza Shaw: Thank you very much, Lee. And I wanted to add that I am really happily married.

Lee Rosen: Happily. Happily. Good. You know, that's a credibility booster on this show because it's like, you can sit here and tell us all about how to stay happily married and then we find out -- it's like, oh, I couldn't do it for myself. Yeah.

Liza Shaw: That's right. Right. Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Well, let's kind of dig into this. You know, we talk about staying happily married but there are a lot of people that listen to this show that really are sort of on the brink. If everything was going well, they might not be listening. And I've seen a lot of couples that end up getting divorced thinking, "Gosh, this will make me happy and

everything will be fine." And it isn't fine. They find out later -- years later -- that maybe that wasn't the best decision.

And so I want to talk about people who kind of at the last minute do try and fix things and they feel like, "Gosh, we're right on the edge of this not working out, but let's give it one more try."

Liza Shaw: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Are you seeing people like that in your practice?

Liza Shaw: Yeah. Actually, I think it's sad but a lot of times the couples that are sitting in my office are there as a last resort, sort of last stop on the way to your office probably.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: And there have been years of fighting and polarizing and a lot of patterns of really dysfunctional communication. And, like you said, a lot of people do have this fantasy that divorce is the solution to their unhappiness. And usually they even carry it even further to, "The next relationship is my solution to the unhappiness."

But yeah, unfortunately, it'd be better if people were working to deal with the problem before it gets to the point of considering divorce. But yes, most people that end up working with me are sitting on the couch as a last resort.

Lee Rosen: Well, if they've already sort of dropped the D-bomb and they're already talking about divorce, it's got to be really tough to go backwards from that point once somebody has kind of said, "We're done. I'm out of here."

Liza Shaw: Yeah. It's really toxic, actually, to the process of exploring whether or not something else is possible for the marriage if the D word is looming. And I call it the D word. I don't like to even utter that word all that much in my office because it's literally like -- I kind of use a metaphor in my mind of since the couple is my client and therapists are trained to deal with -- if a client is suicidal when they walk in the office and they're talking about killing themselves, when a couple walks in the door and they start talking divorce it's like a suicide conversation.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: And so I have to really kick it into high gear. And frankly, this is my specialty as well. I really enjoy working with couples who are on the

brink of divorce and exploring that with them. But we really have to get some ground rules set -- firm ground rules -- about using that threat and not using that threat in order to make it safe enough to explore.

Lee Rosen: Well, what sort of issues are they facing at that point when they come in to see you, when they've already sort of said, "Hey, this is where we're going; we're headed toward divorce"? What are the big things going on in their lives that are causing such trouble for them?

Liza Shaw: Well, you know, everybody's different but I really have started to notice a trend with a lot of the couples that have ended up working with me. There's usually a pattern of chronically unresolved conflict, ineffective communication, high polarization. People are on opposite ends of issues. It's like right and wrong, good and bad, win and lose; there's just a lot of power struggling going on.

And pretty much when people walk into my office the conversations are about how each person had wronged the other person or the other person -- each person is actually working really hard to not be proven wrong by the other. And like I said, I have to set some really firm limits about that with people, and ground rules, because if people come in and work with me and think that they're going to get different results by doing the same thing that got them into my office, it's insanity. That just won't work.

Lee Rosen: Well, I can certainly see why you want to specialize in this. It sounds easy.

Liza Shaw: Oh, god. I don't know.

Lee Rosen: It's like you live in a war zone or something.

Liza Shaw: What's that?

Lee Rosen: It's like you live in a war zone.

Liza Shaw: It is like a war zone in my -- it can be that way and I have to be extremely assertive to not allow it to become that, because that is the -- that's toxic. That's the stuff that brought them in my office. And people will -- they can go ahead -- I tell people this. If you're going to use that threat, be prepared to follow through with it or don't use it.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: And if you're going to get divorced, which would be very sad for everyone concerned -- but if you are going to get divorced, you feel free to go out and test this theory that it's -- I haven't had anyone come back and prove me wrong. The same problems that you have now will show up in the next relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. Why do they even come in when they're in that state? I mean, is it one spouse just begging the other to come in or somebody feeling like, "Gosh, if I didn't do this I'd feel like I hadn't tried"? What motivates somebody to show up once they're that polarized?

Liza Shaw: I think people really want to know that they did all that they could to make the problems in their relationship -- to resolve their problems if possible. And generally speaking, one person in the couple is a little bit more bought into the idea of working it out than the other, but sometimes both parties are really ready to work. And those are my favorite couples that I can -- I don't really have to motivate people because they're already motivated.

But generally what we'll do is I can actually manage holding two different goals. I might be working with a couple where one person is really motivated to see if the marriage can stay together and the other one is really half out the door. And I can actually -- as long as people are willing to -- there's one rule that has to be followed or we can't really explore the possibilities, and that is that divorce itself has to come off the table for a period of time. And six months is a good baseline that I usually recommend for people.

Lee Rosen: Right. You just have to take it off the agenda, make it not an option if you're really going to keep working on things. You can't keep going back to that I guess.

Liza Shaw: Yeah. Because we need to have a safe enough space in the room to be able to explore -- the way that I work with couples is that we need to be able to explore what has not worked in the relationship. And one of the things that has not worked is pointing the finger at the other person. So what will work is if you point the finger at yourself, so to speak, if you are willing to step up and take some responsibility for your share of the dysfunction in the relationship.

But there is no possibility of anybody feeling safe enough to do that if they're thinking they have to defend something.

Lee Rosen: You know, I'm just curious but we're talking about people at the brink, and some of our listeners are hopefully not at the brink. They might be having a little bit of trouble. But why didn't these people

that you're talking about -- why didn't they come see you a few years earlier, before it got to such a bad place?

Liza Shaw: Well, I wish they had come to see me.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: I guess I have enough confidence to say that it might have made a difference. But I think that some people have. Some people show up in my office having already sought help from other therapists in the past for their marriage. And some people just -- they think that -- we still live in a culture where there's a taboo about going to seek help and that you're airing your dirty laundry, or you should be able to handle this yourself.

Some of the folks who have gone to other therapists usually come in -- and I don't mean any disrespect to any other therapist -- they come in and report that the therapist that worked with them and tried to help them in their marriage really had no business trying to help people in their marriage. And this is a very specialized type of therapy, and even some of the best marriage therapists will say that it's some of the hardest therapy to do.

And I think this is kind of a little bit of a hole in the counseling profession that needs to get filled. We should not be allowing people to provide a service -- professional service -- for which they are not actually trained and qualified to provide. It would be like going and having a general practitioner remove skin cancer.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: It's just not -- they don't really know what they're doing. They are well-meaning. They are actually very highly specialized and trained in their individual work that they do and they're very good at that. But a lot of couples come to me with really kind of horror stories about counselors that they've worked with that it was like raking open the wounds and then the counselor had no idea what to do with them once they got it all raked open.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Let me ask you about where the kids fit into this. Do you get a lot of people saying, "Okay. We're coming in here to give it this last try because of the children"?

Liza Shaw: Yeah, I do. And some therapists actually think that this is not a good reason to begin therapy. And I have a really different opinion about that. I do think it's a bad reason to stay married if it's the only thing that they're staying together for. But as far as I'm concerned,

whatever brings people in my door is a good enough reason because they're here and they have now the opportunity to explore what is possible in areas where they've never explored before.

But staying together for the sake of the children, it is a good reason to work on the marriage, but only if the goal of working on the marriage is to end up with a relationship worthy of modeling for the children. In other words, once a couple's gotten past all of the dysfunction and the toxic patterns and really begun to learn some new skills, then they can pass that down to their children and they can model deeply fulfilling, loving marital relationships, which can only be good for the children. And they didn't know how to do that before.

My belief is that children deserve two parents and a loving family, a solid foundation for their future. And when their parents learn this, they can teach that.

And on another note, I think it's really important for therapists to take a stand about working to save the marriage in the case where there are children. And in the case when there aren't, but especially in the case when there are children because the idea is that this isn't just going to affect your family and your children; it's actually going to make a difference for generations down the line.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Children's children.

Liza Shaw: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Well, do people that have kids -- are they more likely to try harder? Are they more successful with you in terms of pulling back from the brink?

Liza Shaw: I've had -- I don't know. I haven't ever really done any solid research to see if more couples that have kids end up working it out than the ones who don't. It'd be an interesting study to go back and look at my cases and see that.

But I just think that people at their core are -- they love each other or they wouldn't be so angry with each other. And so we have to get beyond all of that resentment and the anger and the fear and the paranoia and the mistrust and all of that and remind -- the people have to remind themselves, "Who is this other person that I love?"

But I do think, yeah, probably children are a gift to marriages in that it does give people more of a reason to stay together. I think bottom line is that when people aren't tethered to each other by

their children then sometimes they may feel they have a quicker way out.

Lee Rosen: You know, when people are really at the edge and they've talked about divorce, often they've talked to their friends or their family about what they're thinking. And it just seems like those family members and friends will start taking sides and pumping people up and telling them, "Oh, yeah. I never liked him anyway," or whatever.

Liza Shaw: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: How big a problem is that when you're trying to get them to suspend -- to put the "divorce" word off the table for six months? How do the friends play into things?

Liza Shaw: It's a major, major, major problem. And people really mean well. So this is hard for clients to understand, but what happens is that when we start to consider -- if a person starts to consider the option of divorce -- or even before they're considering divorce, just during the acrimony, during the fighting and the arguing, they get on the phone to call their girlfriend or their mom or their brother or whatever and they're seeking agreement from the other person. In the world of right and wrong there's only room for one person to be right. And so the people who care about you are going to agree with you because they want you to know that they love you.

So they mean well but it's actually a really, really unhealthy thing to do, to reach out to friends or family when you're having an argument with your spouse. It's so much more healthy to call your therapist.

And to agree -- that's another thing. I really do ask people to agree not only not to have divorce on the table for at least six months, but also to limit the conversations that they have with people about the relationship, and also to seek help from people who will hold them accountable to what they're doing, not who are going to gossip about what the other person is doing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Something you said earlier, which is really striking, is this whole idea that you're going to have the same issues in your next relationship that you have in this relationship if you don't get things on track.

Liza Shaw: Yes.



Lee Rosen: And what I'm hearing from you is if you got divorced once, unless you changed something big, you're going to get divorced again.

Liza Shaw: Yeah. Highly likely.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And so it almost sounds like -- if your spouse is driving you crazy and you're unhappy, what I feel like you're saying to some extent is it's really not your spouse because if you're going to have the same problem in round two -- marriage number two -- well, it's you.

Liza Shaw: Exactly. It's like kind of bad news, but at the same time it's really good news. Because once you realize that -- they say, "Wherever you go, there you are."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: When you realize that you have been the contributing factor that is kind of the common denominator of all these relationships, if you can look back and see that they were all -- people complain, "Why do I always attract the wrong guy or the wrong woman?" But you realize you are the common denominator.

And when that happens, at first it ticks you off. People don't like that. They don't want to have to own up to the patterns of dysfunction that they are repeating. And clearly it's not conscious. It's not like they're just walking around trying to be jerky or something like that. It's that they don't have the skills that are necessary.

Once they realize it, though, there's incredible power because they say, "Oh, I can't change the other person, but I can do something about me." And that does make it much more likely that then they won't go repeating this over and over again. They'll really get the past complete for themselves, be able to go forward not reacting the way that they used to react when a person acted a specific way. And suddenly, new results start showing up in their lives.

Lee Rosen: Right. If you figure out it's you, at least you have a shot.

Liza Shaw: Exactly. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: May not work, but at least you've got something to work with. Right.



Liza Shaw: Yeah. You have a lot better chance of not repeating the past and not seeing the same results if you're the one in charge of not repeating it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, just sort of to take a logical jump there, so if it really is - - if I am the problem, not you, why am I in couples counseling? Why am I not in just individual counseling?

Liza Shaw: I'll work with people individually sometimes. Sometimes when people are so polarized that there is no possibility of feeling safe to explore those things with the other person present, I can sometimes ask people to come in individually. But I always bring people back together. And even when I am working with people individually, I'm still working with the couple. I'm sort of aware always that the other person's perspective is there, that this isn't a linear thing.

But the reason is because individual therapy, when you're sitting down with one person and you are listening to their perspective as the truth, they are sharing it with you and the only thing you get is that one perspective. And then what a therapist -- the danger that a therapist can play into is that they can actually buy into that perspective as being right, which means then that the other person has to be wrong.

And so marriage and family therapy, which is a very, very specialized form of counseling, is a -- it takes a different perspective. It's that there isn't right and wrong. Not that there is no objective right and wrong, but that in the constant conflicts that have been happening with these two people there is perspective -- it's almost like people are committed to having it not work. Because when it's right and wrong, it won't work. Ever. Forever and ever and ever.

I guarantee all the listeners out there that if you are in conversations constantly with people in your life who you love that are about right and wrong, good and bad, win and lose, you're not going to have the fulfillment that you want. And so that is really important to be explored together. Because if we're just talking about that separately, each person doesn't have the opportunity to witness the other person actually starting to shift their perspective.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Let me ask you this now, just sort of shifting gears into the very practical. So you mentioned the idea of sort of putting the D word on hold for six months. Does it take six months if we're kind of on the brink? And when you're successful -- I mean, obviously some of these folks you're just not able to help, I assume.

Liza Shaw: Right.

Lee Rosen: But when you are able to be successful, how long does it take? How many sessions does it take? How much work is this? Is this really worth the trouble?

Liza Shaw: Oh, it is worth it. I believe it's really worth it. I have seen so many miracles go on with the people I've worked with. And it really is hard work.

How many sessions? I'd say that I usually recommend one session per week, if you can do it that way, to keep the momentum going. So the quicker that people are willing to jump in, willing to commit, really willing to take responsibility -- it's impossible to be able to give you a figure like three months and it's done.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Liza Shaw: There are some people who can do this work and get it done in three months and have a brand new relationship at the end of it. And there are some people who take two years. And they may have some progress in the first four months and then they may have some -- what we'll call like a slip, where they go back to some of the old behaviors together for a while.

I have a quote that my sister shared with me. A friend of hers told her. She said, "I know the guaranteed secret to staying together and staying married. And it works 100 percent of the time and it's 100 percent guaranteed. Don't get divorced."

I mean, it's kind of funny but I would only ascribe to that, of course, if you're also willing to do the work required to have the kind of relationship you really want. And people don't know how to do that usually by themselves, so that's why I believe therapists can be a great --

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, if they knew how to do it, they wouldn't be in that spot at that time.

Liza Shaw: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So some people it doesn't work. I mean, that's just reality. What if you -- if it doesn't work, is there anything to be gained by giving it this last shot? Because obviously, if it's not going to work I would just as soon not repeat my patterns again in my next relationship. I mean, is there some chance I might be able to come

see an expert like you, it still doesn't work, but I can avoid this repeating thing in my life?

Liza Shaw:

Yes. Oh, gosh, yes. The way I look at it is that the work is valuable for its own sake. And I tell people that when they're sitting here with me they have an opportunity to really become powerful in their life in a way they never realized they could be powerful, because most of the folks are seeing that it was things that happened that were out of their control that caused the breakdowns in their marriage.

When they realized that there were things that occurred that were in their control, that they didn't know that they didn't know -- kind of a blind spot for them -- they become much more empowered.

And so the other thing is that they learn all these incredible, important life skills, like learning how to accept, how to just simply be unconditionally accepting of circumstances as they are. They learn the difference between places where they have to accept it because they can't do anything about it and the places in their lives where they actually need to set a boundary, be firm and not tolerate something that's intolerable.

These kind of skills -- they learn how to forgive each other. They learn how to complete the past or resolve chronic conflicts that if they look hard enough, they actually see that the pattern of conflict that they had with their spouse has probably been going on far before they met their spouse.

So they get the opportunity to resolve some of these lifelong things like abandonment fears or depression that they've had their whole life. And when they get that, they're forever altered.

And so people actually who have realized at the end of that process that their marriage was not going to work, they part as friends and they have a peaceful good-bye. And they're able -- especially when they have children, they are able to have amicable relationships with each other.

I've had people who go on to continue to get together for holidays with each other and their new spouses. And then their new relationships are so much more thriving and they attract more -- I would say -- healthier people because they themselves are now healthier people.

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Lee Rosen: Right. It just sounds very hopeful and you're very optimistic about it. So maybe the marriage doesn't work, but at least you improve your life.

Liza Shaw: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And that really -- that's terrific.

We've covered a lot of ground today. Are there any other things -- I want to tell everybody about your websites, and I'll do that in a second. But is there anything else you feel like we've missed that we need to add to the show?

Liza Shaw: I just think the important thing I want to stress is that when your marriage is on the brink it's just so important to be able to know that you did all that you could possibly do. And seeking the help of a professional is important.

But as the consumer, the married couple really needs to be careful about the choice they make in the specialist that they work with. And as I said, licensed marriage and family therapists are really the qualified specialists to work with people in this area. And I, again, don't mean any disrespect to any other of the professional counselors.

But I did want to mention that there's a wonderful website. [MarriageFriendlyTherapists.com](http://MarriageFriendlyTherapists.com) is the website for the national registry of marriage friendly therapists. And what this is, is the only thing of its kind that I know of. It's sort of an umbrella organization of marriage and couples therapists. And they only accept highly trained and highly experienced marriage and couples therapists. And members of this registry must consider themselves to value marriage, to value lifelong commitment and be committed to helping marriages succeed, if at all possible.

And also, there's a website for the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, which is [www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org).

Lee Rosen: Terrific. Well, those are great resources. Let me also mention your websites, Liza. There's [PowerToThrive.com](http://PowerToThrive.com), which has a lot of information on it. Great articles there, a blog that Liza writes. And also, [PowerToThriveRadio.com](http://PowerToThriveRadio.com), which has podcasts and interviews that Liza has done. Terrific resources.

And I'll put a link to all of these websites that Liza mentioned and to Liza's websites in our show notes.

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Liza, thank you so much for spending time with us today. I appreciate it.

Liza Shaw: Thanks for having me, Lee.

Lee Rosen: And thank you all for listening in and joining us. We'll be back next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your comments, if you have any suggestions or input. Love to hear from you. You can call our comment line at (919) 256-3083. Also, 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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