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Will Your Marriage Last Forever?

This is episode #99 of Stay Happily Married, "Will Your Marriage Last Forever?"

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

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm by telephone with Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones. She has been practicing for over 10 years and she's currently with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina.

Katrina has all kinds of experience in both clinical and forensic psychology and she's on the front lines helping people with serious personal and family crises like mental illness, substance abuse and violence.

Welcome back to the show, Katrina.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Thank you.

Lee Rosen:

I'm really glad you can be here today. You know, we're talking about this whole idea of will marriage last forever? And I don't know that anybody goes into a marriage never expecting to have any difficulties with their spouse. But when we look at marriages that have lasted a long time, I'm guessing that they've had their fair share of ups and downs but we're all reasonably adept at managing them. Is that safe to say?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah, I think so, as long as we're talking about people who are together for the right reasons and because they're happy. You know, there are some people who do stay together because they are staying together kind of for the kids, for family,

companionship, money. So what we're going to be focusing on is how to stay married for a long time, happily married.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that's the way to do it. We've done shows before about people staying together for the wrong reasons and that just doesn't sound like a very happy time. Now, do you see people that have been married for a long time that get into patterns of disagreements and conflicts and that sort of thing that go unresolved?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Oh, absolutely. I think that it happens for people who have been together for short periods of time and people who've been together for real long periods of time, maybe 10 years or more they've married.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you see people that have been married I guess for a long time, and you also see folks that have been married for a short time and things are already on the rocks and they're coming to see you. How are couples who haven't been married for very long feeling when they come to you with problems? You know, those people that are coming early on in the marriage. Is there any sort of panic that they've made a mistake, that they've done the wrong thing in getting married in the first place?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think panic's the right word. I think that people are -- when they're coming in in the early years, they seem kind of surprised that they're having disagreements or difficulties because they feel like that's something that should just happen later on in the marriage. And so they're very focused on, "I want to work on preventing future problems," but there is that sense of panic like, "Oh, no. What have I done?"

And so people kind of go through that period of happy dating. And then maybe, once they get to know each other a little better, they start to notice some problems during their engagement. Maybe right after they get married. I've worked with a number of people who've been married for about a year and then they notice that they're having problems.

There's kind of a sense that the other person maybe was hiding who they really were until the commitment was made, which may or may not really actually be the case. Or qualities that were once endearing in some sort of way are now kind of annoying or in conflict with that other person's value system. So I always think of the person who seems fun and spontaneous when you're dating now seems kind of flaky and unreliable.

Lee Rosen: Right. Boy, I'll tell you, even if you realize that things are not right but you've already started moving toward getting married, that's a tough train to get off of.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yes, it is. Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: A lot of social -- all your friends and family moving in one direction and all of a sudden you think maybe you want to move in another one. That's got to be very tough.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: It is difficult. Yes.

Lee Rosen: Well, shifting gears a little bit, when you're seeing people that have been married for a long time and they're coming in to see you, what are things looking like for them and what are they feeling?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, some of them kind of feel like they've realized that they've had problems for a while but they just haven't had the time or really kind of the inclination to work on things. So maybe they've been really focused on their career paths or raising their children, really focused on accumulating wealth, maybe taking care of other family members -- having a parent in the home or something like that -- and then something shifts.

Some people will go all the way through to retirement and then notice, "Oh, I have to pay attention to my partner again." Sometimes it's job changes, the children move out of the house. But then basically you notice one another again and realize that you've become strangers.

Or there's the other side of it where we know we've had problems all along but we're just using all these other areas of our life to avoid the conflict and avoid dealing with the relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. So they've known things aren't working but they're just so busy. I mean, I think it's fascinating that you say they realize it like around retirement, because suddenly you've got all this free time and there's nothing you can use to avoid -- although, I see some retirees that stay pretty busy as well.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, that's true.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Maybe the solution is not to get a divorce; it's just to go volunteer somewhere.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Go fishing, as my dad would say.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what are people doing in these situations? What occurs to them? Obviously at some point they're coming to see you, but my guess is that you are not the first option they consider. What are they trying in advance of coming to see you? What tools are they employing to try and fix the situation for themselves?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, I think it kind of varies. There are some people who really have tried to work on it themselves where they've talked about the situation, they've pointed out that they're not happy to one another, and they've kind of tried to talk through it but they just haven't had that outside person who could help kind of take some of the emotion out of it. So they've actually done a pretty good job; it's just not quite where they want to be at.

There are other people who just avoid the conflict. They just don't really ask about what's going on. They're afraid that if they do ask about their spouse's unhappiness that either they'll have to make changes they're not comfortable with or they're sometimes afraid that if they bring things up it's going to lead to divorce.

And then there are some people who really are just kind of clueless. They either are so focused on themselves or their career or whatever else is going on that they presume if their spouse has a problem with them that they'll talk to them about it, so there must not be a problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. So I'm kind of going backwards a little bit. So if you're early on in the marriage, is there -- what would you look for? If you wanted to answer the question, "Is my marriage going to last or are we in deep trouble?" what would be the really big red flags early on that you would say, "You know, maybe you did make a mistake"?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, I would say really looking at your communication. I think that's something that comes up a lot when we talk on this show, but communication really is key to making a relationship work. And it doesn't mean that you have to have perfect communication all the time, but being open with one another and honest with one another and being willing to talk to one another about your feelings. Not feeling like you have to keep stuff inside because maybe it will cause problems in the relationship, because generally not talking about it is what causes more problems.

And are you feeling like you're kind of spending more time working on the relationship than you are enjoying the relationship? I think that if you're feeling overwhelmed by the

relationship -- maybe I'm spending too much time with this person or I just don't feel like I have my own space -- that that can kind of be a warning sign early on.

Feeling like there are too many problems already, rather than, "Oh, this is just one thing that we have to work on but all of these things make up for it."

Lee Rosen:

Right. Then if you fast-forward to later in the relationship and you've been doing the things you've suggested -- well, I guess the word "suggested" is wrong, but you've been doing the things you mentioned, that people are avoiding the conflict and they're really -- they're busy and they're going on with their lives. They're not really focused on the problems in the marriage. But now they've got the time and all of a sudden that's all they're seeing. The conflict is suddenly, like, on a billboard right above their head.

What are the odds that they're going to -- now that their lives have changed a little bit and they have time to see these things, are they going to survive?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones:

I think it's actually a pretty good time for people to take a moment to reflect on the relationship because you do have more time to invest. And it's a time when people often feel like, "Oh, this is really something worth investing in because now I'm going to be with this --" like that real sense of, "I'm going to be with this person for the rest of my life. And now that I have all this free time, I'm really going to be spending my life with them."

And looking at, "Is it really as negative as I'm making it out to be or am I kind of jumping to conclusions? Am I assuming things about my partner -- what they're thinking, what they're feeling -- and so if they make some sort of comment to me, I'm taking that as a more negative comment than it really is? What are my kind of assumptions about our relationship in general that may not be correct that I could be working on?"

Lee Rosen:

Right. Yeah. Do you see -- you know these folks -- we've talked about this before, but folks that stay together for the kids. And so they get to this point where suddenly they have more time because now they've got the empty nest. I assume that -- I mean, they're in sort of a different pool of people, aren't they, in terms of the odds of working it out at that stage? It's not like they've suddenly noticed the problem now that the kids are gone. It's like, they knew they were having a problem all along.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah. And I think that it really can depend on whether that couple feels like this is a relationship that, "I want to salvage for the sake of the relationship," or "We really were staying together because that's what we thought was best for our kids. And now that they're raised, maybe it's time for us to go our separate ways." And not even necessarily being angry with each other, but just kind of feeling that you've fallen out of love.

But I do think that sometimes what happens is people get to that point and they look at each other and they go, "Well, maybe it's worth a try. What was it that I originally fell in love with this person about and is that something that I can get back?"

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, if you've reached those retirement years and now suddenly you're getting divorced, I mean, I can -- you're losing a lot. All those shared memories. You're going to go out and theoretically find somebody new but you've got to train them.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: You've got to break in a new one, which seems like a lot of work. I know the old one was cranky and difficult but the new one, who knows what you're getting into?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: I don't know. It's a very tough situation. And I guess everybody's making their list of pros and cons and trying to decide how motivated they are to work things out. I guess some of that, they sit down with you and they sort of assess how hard it's going to be and how painful it's going to be and -- very tough.

So let me ask you this. When a couple comes to you and they realize that they want to resolve this conflict, they don't want it to get worse -- or maybe they're even afraid that it'll never get any better -- what's the first thing that you do to get them on the right track?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: I really try to get people to identify their own expectations and assumptions about themselves as a partner in the relationship, their expectations and assumptions about the relationship and then again about their partner. Because really looking at, do you have reasonable expectations or do you expect that your partner's going to always be perfect and bring you flowers every day? Are you making incorrect assumptions and kind of misunderstanding or over-personalizing things?

So I always think about, it's just a matter of how do you hear the message? If I walk into the room and I say, "Man, the cat box stinks," my husband can either respond, "Yes, it does; whose turn is it to clean it?" or he can say, "Why are you telling me? You can take care of it too." So either he can hear it as I'm just making a comment and he can agree with me, or he can feel like I'm criticizing him. And so --

Lee Rosen: But we all know what you meant.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: -- really looking at, is he making the assumption that I'm being critical and is that a correct assumption to make or not?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. I hear you. But I know what you meant.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: There are times when the cat box just stinks and you just make a comment about it.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: It's actually my job to clean the box so it would be my own criticism.

Lee Rosen: I hear you. But it does make sense. Everyone is automatically putting -- they're making assumptions about these kinds of comments. And you're saying, slow down. Wait a minute. That's the history talking, maybe not necessarily the words.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you're making us reflect on all of that. What else is important at the outset?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Really being able to look at, are there things in the relationship that you feel are kind of negotiable areas or if this doesn't change, I can't stand it anymore. And usually I would say that things that people think are non-negotiable are negotiable. It's more a matter of if you're in a dangerous situation, the person is really controlling or hurting you in some sort of way, that might be the non-negotiables.

But a lot of people like, "Well, if he doesn't start picking up his socks off the floor, I just can't take it anymore." Okay. That's really something that we can work with and is negotiable.

So trying to also kind of remember that the idea isn't to come into therapy and hope to change your partner. It's looking at your own

thoughts, your own -- again -- kind of assumptions and expectations, or even your own behavior, and look at what am I contributing to this relationship? What can I change? Whether it's how I react to something or maybe it's how I'm behaving in the first place.

But really looking at, it's not a blame game. It's not a matter of coming in and saying, "You have to do X, Y, Z to change or I'm leaving," as much as it's a collaborative process of, "These are the things that I'm not happy with; how do we work on that together?"

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, that's not why we want to come to therapy. We want to come --

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: I know.

Lee Rosen: We want to come so you can tell our spouse that they're wrong and we are right. Yeah. I don't know where you learned this "it's not a blame game" thing, but I think you're way off with that. That may be what they teach you in school, but --

And all of a sudden, my wife is giving me a hard time about putting my shoes in front of the laundry basket. It's like, where did this come from? My shoes have been there forever. You talking about the socks in the laundry basket? It's like suddenly my shoes have to sit on the side of the laundry basket, not in front of the laundry basket because it blocks the exit for the laundry basket to go to the laundry room. Yeah.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, there is something to be said for if things have been going well and you really haven't had anything that you feel like has been a conflict in the relationship, sometimes you start noticing other things that you kind of ignored before because they weren't that big of a deal. But when things are going well, then it's kind of annoying. And so being able to have perspective on, "Okay, if the worst thing I can do is be annoyed by where he's putting his shoes, we must be in a pretty good place."

Lee Rosen: So you're suggesting that maybe I should follow Tiger Woods' lead and have sex with a striper. Then she'll really have something --

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: No.

Lee Rosen: Then I can put my shoes wherever I want.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: That is not what I'm suggesting.

Lee Rosen: I'm just checking.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Perhaps not being too annoyed with her wanting you to move your shoes and perhaps her not being too annoyed with your shoes being there.

Lee Rosen: It's really a good sign. Right. I hear you. I hear you. So what about the folks that have been paying attention to other things, they've been busy with their lives, now they suddenly have time to focus on the relationship. What do you suggest for those folks when you get started with them?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Really kind of finding a way for them to reconnect. A lot of it is just taking time to get to know your spouse once again. This is a person that you used to admire, that used to really be a priority in your life, and getting back to why was that? What was it that you admired about them? How did you manage to make them a priority before? And what really makes you a couple, creating that shared meaning? What values do you share? Finding ways to kind of refocus that we've had this connection before; how do we get that back?

Lee Rosen: Right. All good advice. Is there anything else we should know if we really want to make our marriage last a long time?

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, I always kind of think about that there are always going to be problems. So how do you work on solving the solvable problems? Because there are some things that are just temperamental differences between partners. You know, one person may be a "let's get this taken care of right now" and one person really needs time to think about it. That might not necessarily change.

But being able to look at, "Okay, we have differences. That's fine. How do we solve the problem with our differences?" So you can avoid gridlocks. So you don't really just get stuck in "my way is the right way."

And remembering that your partner can influence you in a real positive way. That just because they're making a recommendation doesn't mean they're trying to control you or to make you change. You used to listen to their ideas; why did that stop?

I think that particularly can happen around parenting where if there's one partner who's staying at home with the kids, they

might have a real good handle on "this is the best thing to do with this kid in this situation" to get them to respond. But there's a real big difference between saying, "Hey, this works for me. Maybe you want to try it," and "You need to do blah-blah-blah because that's what's going to work."

And when your partner's making recommendations, that maybe they do have some good ideas; they're not just trying to tell you what to do. As long as it's delivered correctly.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good advice. I appreciate you being here with us today. Thank you so much.

Dr. Kuzyszyn-Jones: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: I'd like to thank Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones for joining us today and I want to remind you that her website is filled with information about the counseling and therapy services that are offered at Lepage Associates. The site is at LepageAssociates.com. You can also reach their office by phone at (919) 572-0000. They're in Durham, North Carolina.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your feedback. We appreciate all the comments that we get, helping us with ideas for upcoming shows and feedback about what's working and what's not working. Very, very grateful that you keep in touch, so please keep doing that.

You can reach us on 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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