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How to Fix Your Spouse's Bad Habits

This is Stay Happily Married #101, "How to Fix Your Spouse's Bad Habits."

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 here by telephone with Jennifer Coleman. Jennifer is a life transition coach with Rosen Law Firm and she helps clients set goals and priorities for their lives. Jennifer has a masters of science in marriage and family counseling and she's a nationally certified counselor.

The good news is she's married and has been married for 13 years. She lives just outside Charlotte, North Carolina with her husband and her two children. I'm excited to hear her ideas about how to fix our spouse's bad habits, not that my spouse has any.

Jennifer, welcome to the show.

Jennifer Coleman: Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: I really should say, "Welcome back to the show," because you've been here before, but it's been a while. And I'm really excited to talk about my spouse's bad habits, which maybe we'll get into here. But what are some of the common things that spouses find annoying about their partners?

Jennifer Coleman: There are lots of things. The list is probably too long to enumerate. But a few would be leaving your dirty clothes on the floor, asking your spouse how you look, doing something while your spouse is talking to you, that kind of thing. Just tiny little inconsiderations that build up over time.

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Lee Rosen: You know the one you hear everybody talk about is like nagging, just, "When are you going to do this? Why haven't you done --" that kind of thing. That's got to drive people crazy.

The other one I see -- I deal with someone that does this -- is the spouse drinks too much. I mean, that may be a much bigger problem, but even if it's not that's got to be embarrassing and awful and drive people kind of crazy.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. You know the thing that all of these little habits have in common is it's something that if you did it within a friendship the friend would probably call you on it. They would probably say, "This is annoying me," or, "I feel when this happens that you're not thinking about me or noticing that we're in public," or one of those things.

And in our spouse relationship we tend to get so comfortable that we almost fuse with the person and we sometimes forget that we're actually separate. They're separate from us and they still have this individual persona in public or even in the private of our own homes.

So in a way we think of that as a good thing. Here we have someone we can tell anything to, that we're completely comfortable with. But in the long run, if you're going to be in a relationship with this person long term you have still have to practice those little decencies, just like you would with a friend. Otherwise they might get the message that they're not important enough for you to do that.

Lee Rosen: Right. My wife is a clutter person. Thankfully, actually, she's in the midst of cleaning up because her parents are staying in our house for the next week looking after our kids. So she's been straightening everything up. But the clutter -- we've been married 20 years and the clutter just makes me a little crazy.

Does your husband do anything that just drives you a little nuts? Anything you want to say on the show?

Jennifer Coleman: I'm sure there are lots of things. I can't think of anything that would sit that --

Lee Rosen: Oh, how convenient.

Jennifer Coleman: He's usually a pretty laid back guy, easy to get along with. That in itself can be annoying.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. These nice people, they drive me crazy. Well, let me ask you this. Are there people that are more sensitive to these things or situations that just sort of make all of this more intolerable?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think the thing that makes it most intolerable within a marriage is when a spouse has said, "This thing that you do drives me crazy," and yet they see it occur over and over and over again. Because often times the received message then is, "I'm not important enough. This person doesn't care about me. They don't notice. They're not willing to notice; therefore they don't love me."

And so there's really two sides of that. For the person who's being annoyed, to remember that when you first got into this relationship and you were in that active love/dating phase, you probably didn't notice those things about the person and you also assumed the best about their intention toward you. That if they did something annoying, they definitely weren't doing it because they didn't care about you; they were doing it because it was just something that they did. And over time our perspective about that can shift and we forget to assume the best intentions of the other person.

So that's the part, I think, on the person who's being annoyed and to use your words and ask for what you need from the person in a way that causes the least amount of defensiveness as possible.

And then on the part of the person who is doing the so-called annoying behavior, that person has to be willing to receive the message and to hear that and respond, just like you would if it was a friend or another family member that you cared about, that you would probably shift your behavior if you were doing something that was actually upsetting someone.

Lee Rosen: What is it about this stuff -- like, let's say I'm the one who's being annoyed and my wife is the clutterer person. I hope she doesn't listen to this show. She never listens and I'm sure this will be the one that she listens to, which is actually one of those things that annoys me is that she never listens. But that's a whole other discussion.

So, like I have mentioned the clutter on many occasions and it doesn't really get a response. And so -- and I think her basic position is, "This is the way I do things. Deal with it. I'm not changing it because this is how I organize my stuff." But how do -- what do you see happen? How is the spouse that's being annoyed feeling about their partner just kind of not doing what they want? How do they react to that?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think in a situation like that it helps to negotiate some terms. One person is saying, "This is my habit. This is the way things are. This

is next to impossible for me to change," knowing that we all can change whatever it is we really want to, but also that we have some things that have been habits for most of our lives.

And so in a case like that, figuring out how the offensive behavior can affect your spouse less, whether it's like we agree that the clutter can exist within these zones but it won't go to this area, or that the two of you have some clean-up pitch that you do together that de-clutters that is helpful, like the two of you attacking the problem rather than one of you attacking the other person. So there are a lot of ways to work with that situation.

But it sounds like sometimes we've been in a long-term situation long enough to know that it's not likely to shift completely and so how do we learn to just put up with or deal with this thing. And it depends on how annoying it is and how much it bothers us where we draw those lines.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. So you're suggesting that maybe I just cope. It's sort of that's what you're saying.

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think the important thing is that it's a partner solution, that when something bothers you in a relationship the important part is to be able to voice that and to feel that your partner responds to you in some way that's positive. So both people probably have to look at what they can do to make the situation better.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Do you think that your spouse typically understands? Like, my little clutter thing I guess is a reasonably good example. Do you think - - I'm probably pretty inarticulate, as I demonstrate on a weekly basis here on this program, but I probably say things like, "The clutter makes me a little crazy." But do you think that -- I mean, it sounds like I'm probably not telling her why this bothers me in a way that would really promote the communication that's going to be required to solve the problem. I mean, is it sort of my job -- you said use your words. Is it really sort of my job to explain why this is bugging me?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think that it's your job to ask for exactly what you want and then to ask for help in finding a solution that provides that. You know, sometimes we do have unrealistic expectations of the way other people will change their behavior to meet our desires.

But whenever something is infringing on our personal dignity or just kind of really bringing us down, it's important that we voice that and insist on something changing, but recognizing that we probably have to be part of the solution, that just leaving it up to the other person to do will be challenging if it's a habit that they've had all this time.

So part of that might be saying to the other person, "Look, I'm happy to remind you when this happens or when it's beginning to bother me, but I'd like to be able to do it in a way that isn't going to make you feel badly about it, that will just be productive so that we can address it together. And what is a way that I can ask you about that or point it out when it happens? How can we talk about it when this happens that won't set you off or make you feel worse about it? Because that's not what I want. I don't want you to feel bad; I just want myself to feel better. I want us both to feel good about the situation."

So kind of giving your spouse a heads-up about the problem at a time that it's not happening and talking about it with really neutral language so that in advance the spouse has accepted a way that you're going to remind or talk about the problem as it occurs. Then perhaps they actually respond in the moment when it is happening and eventually start to catch themselves so that it's not producing a nagging behavior or something that could be annoying your spouse, that you want to ask for what you want without any negativity associated with that.

Lee Rosen: Right. Does it work? Are people successful at fixing these bad habits? Do you hear solutions actually work or do we just kind of keep debating it until we're done?

Jennifer Coleman: Well in the work that I do with couples I've definitely see lots of individuals and lots of couples change their behaviors in ways that make both people happy. And I think the key to that, again, is asking for what you want and need in very precise language.

Sometimes people make comments about what drives them crazy about the other person but they tend to do it in a negative or sarcastic way or in moments of anger. The other person generally doesn't take that seriously. It just adds up in their list of criticisms that they've received from the other person, which is part of this long list of resentments they have about the person.

And so when we feel criticized we're very unlikely to respond in positive ways. We just want to avoid criticism in general. And so I think the key is switching from criticizing your spouse or speaking out in moments of anger to actually talking to them in a productive fashion when you're not feeling super annoyed about this thing so that they can take you seriously and they can hear it out of kind of a loving kindness place about wanting this relationship to be better and not eroding over time.

And that I think -- changing the language, changing the way you address the problem so that your spouse actually starts seeing you as if you were some third party. Like, clearly your spouse probably wouldn't do this behavior around their boss or just maybe one of their other best friends. And sometimes we begin to take each other for granted when we feel very close to someone. And that person has to say, "Hey, yeah, we're comfortable. We love each other. But this bugs me."

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It does sound like the whole concept of dealing with this when you're not upset about it is a key distinction. And for someone with sort of a short attention span, like me, I forget that this is annoying me. And so if I'm agitated about it, I want to bring it up. But maybe I'll carry like a little notebook.

Jennifer Coleman: Make a note. Leave a note. That's right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Because it does -- I mean, you're right. I think the minute everything's rolling along smoothly then the conversation -- everything about it just will feel so totally different. It doesn't seem like -- it's like it's not all that brilliant an insight in a way. But, gosh, you're right; I mean, it would change everything just to do that. It seems like common sense, yet I don't have that. So it seems like this would make a huge difference.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. And in my experience it has made a huge difference. And the other thing that can make it very constructive is if part of that conversation that you have with your spouse is about acknowledging and curiosity and wanting to know from them is there anything that you're doing that actually annoys them and they have mentioned it? Because you would like to work on that for them.

And there's this mutual road. It's this mutual sharing of, "Hey, what's been going on when I haven't been paying attention? Is there anything that you've wanted to talk to me about? Because I'm willing to do that."

And that's kind of exemplifying for them that you're not just pointing out that they're this huge annoying person and you're perfect, but that you've noticed this particular thing that was bothering you and it made you wonder, "Wow. What am I doing that I'm not even aware of that may bother this person? And how could we address these things together?"

Lee Rosen: Right. Wow. That really would change, I think, the reception that you would get from your spouse if you coupled the conversation with that kind of inquiry. That would be a game changer. That's good advice. I appreciate that.

I'm sitting here making notes. I'm planning to implement all this, so --

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, Jennifer, I really do think that the tips will help you to make some of those bad habits not be such a problem in your relationship. Anything else we need to throw into there or add to this or have we covered it all?

Jennifer Coleman: I think don't be so hard on yourself or your spouse when either of you slips up now and then. But also, don't let that be a giving it up point. Once you've set a goal for how you would like things to work, kind of stay the course.

And that might mean coming back and talking about it another time, about how that's been going. And it might mean thanking your spouse when you notice there was an opportunity for them to do the annoying thing and it didn't happen, and letting them know that you notice it and you really appreciate it.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Jennifer, thank you so much for being with us today. I appreciate it.

Jennifer Coleman: Thanks for having me, Lee.

Lee Rosen: And thank you so much for listening and joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your comments about this show or any of our episodes.

You can reach us in a couple of ways. You can call 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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