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How to Keep Your Work from Killing Your Marriage

This is episode #105 of Stay Happily Married, "How to Keep Your Work from Killing Your Marriage."

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 Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio. Nicole practices with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina and she works with adults and children with a wide range of emotional issues. She's provided counseling for groups, couples, individuals, families, with issues everything from mood disorders to substance abuse to life transitions. She has become one of our big rock stars on Stay Happily Married and I'm really excited to have her back today. Nicole, how are you doing?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Great.

Lee Rosen: You know, I want to talk about work killing marriages. Now, I know -- we were talking and I know you are not married but I know you are in a relationship. Does your work every threaten your relationship?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, sure. I really enjoy my work so sometimes I have a habit of maybe working a little bit more than the 40-hour work week. So it certainly has come up.

Lee Rosen: I'll bet it would be -- your job, being a psychologist, and with people wanting to see you in the evening or on weekends, that's

got to be in a way one of the tough jobs. I mean, it's not a 9:00 to 5:00 job, by any stretch of the imagination.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely not.

Lee Rosen: How often do you see couples where one spouse is working to the point where they really are -- it's damaging the relationship or they're neglecting the marriage?

Nicole Imbraguglio: You know, I would say I see it fairly often. But I always do consider it a good sign when they can find the time to make it into my office, so that's always a sign that they're going in the right direction.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Where do you draw the line between -- I mean, I know every time I use the word "normal" with a psychologist they slap me for saying it. Where do you draw the line between sort of a normal work life and one that really is interfering with the relationship?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. You've learned a lot doing these podcasts, haven't you, Lee? So I would have to agree with that. As far as the word "normal," that there really isn't one standard normal. I think every marriage is unique, every relationship is unique, and that the two people are really deciding what's going to work for that relationship.

So the line between normal and interfering is going to be different per relationship. So I think it's important to kind of have that discussion and to figure that out for your relationship as far as where do we want that line to be where it's normal kind of work schedule? And then where do we see that as interfering?

So I think if you're looking to other relationships to decide that, that usually doesn't go very well. So if you were to say, "Well, Bob works 70 hours a week and his wife is fine with it," that's typically not going to get you very far.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. And the spouses don't seem to appreciate that argument, although it sounds compelling to me. So what are the things that you should look for in your life, the signs -- warning indicators, I guess -- that work time is really starting to damage the marriage?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I would say if -- obviously, if someone in the marriage is saying, "Hey, this is a problem," then it's a problem and you need to pay attention to that. If the spouse that's not working too much

is starting to feel resentful, then that's going to be an indicator that there's a problem.

If you're feeling really guilty because you're working so much, that's an indication that's a problem. If you've noticed that when you are spending time together there's been an increase in fighting, or that you're feeling really distant from each other or noticing that you're withdrawing from each other, those are going to be signs that it's a problem.

If you notice a significant decrease in your sex life or that maybe your spouse is now turning to other people for the emotional support you used to give that person, or if you notice that you're missing things that you normally wouldn't miss, like a child's birthday or date night, those are all indicators that it's gotten to be a problem.

Lee Rosen:

Right. Lots of little signs of things going off the rails. You know, is this different -- is there a difference between working too much and -- like I have a friend who really doesn't work -- I don't know when he works but he has hobbies. He's really involved in woodworking and he's in his garage endlessly. Any time I am over there or drive by or whatever, I can see him out there in the garage. And so he's not at work but he's really checked out of the house. He's busy with his hobby.

I have other friends that are really engaged in different social groups and they're busy doing their own thing. Is there a difference between work and all these other activities?

Nicole Imbraguglio:

Well, I think sometimes it can be experienced by the other spouse as pretty similar. But it is different in that there's money involved, which typically opens up a whole host of issues. The payoff of working too much can be increased financial security or kind of the sense of providing for your family successfully. So I tend to see that there's a lot more kind of ego wrapped up in the spouse seen as working too much versus the hobby.

Sometimes working too much can be a little less hurtful for the other spouse because most spouses recognize that they have to work. It's something that they have to do; whereas maybe they see hobbies or kind of social activities as a little more optional.

Lee Rosen:

Right. Yeah. That whole optional thing is a pretty interesting distinction. I would assume that when it comes to work that a lot of people have a pretty good story for why they have to go to work. I mean, "Well, I have to be there. I've got --" it's their job.

Do you hear sort of common stories or -- I have to use the word rationalizations, but excuses for why they're working so much?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I think that excuses makes it seem like they're just trying to get away with something or that they're really just kind of the bad guy. So I think I try to look at -- or I hear a lot about really realistic reasons why they're working a lot. So there's a lot of different things that can be going on.

Some of it is that do you -- maybe the demands of the job really do require a really long work week. Or the boss maybe is putting maybe some unfair demands on them. But in this economy, who wants to say no to their boss? You may be fearful of losing your job. So that's really hard to say no to.

Some people feel a lot of responsibility for the success of the business, either they own the business or they would just personally feel like a failure if the business didn't go well, so they feel like they really need to work extra hard for it.

Sometimes it comes out that actually the problem is poor time management skills, that maybe the person actually has normal or regular sort of tasks that they need to do at work but they just have a hard time managing the time so they end up having to work longer.

It could also be that maybe they thought that the work load -- the increasing work load -- was just kind of temporary and it's just kind of gone on longer than they thought it was going to be.

It could also be a symptom of a greater problem as far as setting boundaries. Sometimes it comes up that the person really is just not good at saying no to things they actually could be saying no to because they don't want to disappoint anyone. And that just ends up in a longer work week.

Lee Rosen: Right. Wow. It's obvious listening to you, you have heard -- you're hearing a lot of these stories.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yes. I think it's unfair to kind of blame the quote/unquote "workaholic" for just being bad and doing something that -- because a lot of things actually could be going on.

And then there's also the family or kind of money concerns. I've heard a lot about that they really feel like they need to work extra, extra hard to reach these financial goals, either so they can retire early or that they're saving up for something. And sometimes

what happens is I send them to a financial planner and they find out they actually don't have to work that hard to reach the goal that they're trying to meet.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that would be a nice surprise, wouldn't it? I don't think that many of us would find that but it's worth a try.

Nicole Imbraguglio: It happens.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And we can't forget about that maybe their house is filled with tension to their work is their happy place. That's something that we need to consider too. Is there something going on at home that they're trying to avoid or not deal with?

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes sense. Then I guess you're really getting into a much bigger can of worms there when that happens in your office.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: You used the word "workaholic." And I'm curious, is this -- I hear that word thrown around a lot by friends of mine. But is this a -- is the work thing similar to an addiction or is there some difference there?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, it's not necessarily an addiction. It could be an addiction. So if you find that you have tried to stop working as much and you just haven't been able to -- like you're kind of -- there's a compulsion there that you just can't stop working so much -- and this does not take into account the external sorts of demands on you. So if your boss is saying, "Hey, you need to be working this much," and you've tried to stop and you can't because of the boss, then that doesn't count as an addiction.

If you notice that it is interfering with other areas of your life, then that is another kind of sign of an addiction.

Lee Rosen: Right. Does the spouse who's working so much usually -- do they usually understand that it is a problem or are they kind of oblivious to what's going on? I guess because they're so busy working.

Nicole Imbraguglio: You know, I've found that most people actually do realize it's a problem; they're just hoping that their spouse doesn't think it's a problem too. Or that they're -- what happens when they come

into therapy is they haven't realized the extent that it's affected their family. So they knew it was kind of a problem; they just didn't know how deep it really ran.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. Now, if you flip around and you -- I've been asking you some questions about the person who's doing all the working. If we're looking at the spouse that's not doing all the working, the one that is distressed about it -- I guess they're distressed -- what are they feeling? What kind of emotions are you hearing about from those folks that feel like their spouse is spending too much time at work?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah, there's a lot of options here. There are a range of emotions that people feel. There's rejection, certainly. If they're taking this increase in work load personally, then they're going to feel rejected by that. Maybe they would feel abandoned if their complaints about it have gone unacknowledged. There's a lot of loneliness, depending on how much time the other spouse is spending outside of the relationship. A lot of resentment, confusion; they're not really sure what's going on. And then maybe frustration or helplessness because they're not really sure what to do about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. What happens in the marriage? When all this is going on, what is the impact on the couple? What are they reporting to you?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, they're reporting that when they are spending time together it's not as enjoyable because they have kind of all these underlying feelings going on that they may not be dealing with. So there's -- when they're communicating, they're not communicating maybe in a really lovingly way. Or their sex life has suffered. When there's less time and more stress, then that's going to make everyone more cranky.

I think another thing that I've heard a lot about -- and I think that it's important to really get the side of the spouse who isn't working as far as -- or working too much -- what exactly is bothersome to them about the person who's working too much? So is it that they are resentful of the extra household responsibilities or childcare? Or is it that they miss the spouse? Like, I've heard a range of things as far as what actually is the problem, like why it bothers them so much.

So I would say that some of the problems include more household and child care responsibility for the non-workaholic spouse and just less time to enjoy fun things together.

Lee Rosen: What do you do? When they're sitting in front of you that very first meeting and you're getting a feel for this, you're hearing, gosh, this one's working too much and this one's not happy about it, what is sort of the first step that you have them take to address this problem?

Nicole Imbraguglio: The first step I have them take is to help them understand where the other person's coming from and understanding what is really motivating the person who's working too much. Just like you were kind of surprised at all of the different reasons that could be behind why someone's working too much, so I think that we kind of assume that this person is working too much because they don't care about us, or they're just doing it to be mean. And I think there are just so many different things that can be going on.

So the first step I have is for them to really focus on what is going on with the other person. What's upsetting to them about working that much, so they get a good idea of what to do next. So if you have a good idea of the problem, then you know how to solve the problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good starting place. What are the things that both spouses need to be doing to really remedy the situation?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, for the non-workaholic spouse, that person can focus on what they really need to be happy when their spouse is at work. So what is going to be fun or enriching for them to do in their time? Maybe they find a Meetup group that they're really interested in or they make some new friends, join a tennis league, write a novel. Whatever's been on their to-do list or their bucket list some people have, now's the time to do that. You have this extra time while your spouse is at work.

Also, it's important for the non-workaholic spouse to really not nag. I really have never heard anyone say, "I just feel so close to my spouse when they're nagging me and nagging me and nagging me." So I think it's really important. It's kind of our instinct to do that but we need to learn to reframe the complaints into requests.

So, "You're never home," really isn't going to get you very far. The person's just going to be defensive and guilty. So a reframe for that would be, "I really miss you lately. I would love to spend some time with you. This weekend can we have dinner on Saturday?"

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Are there other things that people need to know and to be doing in order to make sure that work doesn't ruin their marriage?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I would say that there are definitely other things that the spouses can be doing to address the problem or to make sure that it doesn't ruin the marriage. I think the understanding of knowing for yourself exactly why it bothers you, keeping a normal schedule as much as possible for the person who is not the person working too much. So don't give up vacations because your spouse is too busy. Don't keep the kids up past their bedtime to say good night.

I think one thing that I've tried with couples that has worked really well is trying to set new boundaries but doing it as experiments. So some people aren't as assertive to say, "Hey, look, definitely it's not okay for you to work in Saturday and Sunday." So we have them do an experiment where, "All right. So let's try not working on Sunday for two weeks and let's just see how it goes."

And then after two weeks they kind of see -- so the person who has been working too much can see that actually the world didn't end because they didn't work on Sunday for two weeks and that maybe they even saw their spouse being really happy because they took that time off.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic advice. Nicole, thank you so much for being with us. I really appreciate it.

Nicole Imbraguglio: No problem.

Lee Rosen: You can learn more about Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio's practice at her website. The website is LepageAssociates.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes. Phone number for their office is (919) 572-0000.

We have been getting a lot of feedback lately. My favorite was a note from one of our listeners that said, "The host talks too much." So I've tried to be quieter today. But I really do appreciate the feedback and would love to hear from you. We get a lot of our ideas for shows and all sorts of input about making this show better and more helpful to you.

You can reach us by calling 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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