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Saving Your Marriage After Infidelity

This is episode #107 of Stay Happily Married, "Saving Your Marriage After Infidelity."

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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 am here by telephone with Mary Jo Rapini who joins us from Texas. Mary Jo's a licensed professional counselor, nationally renowned psychotherapist, and an author. You may have seen her on CNN or Headline News.

Mary Jo has a private practice in Houston where she helps couples deal with some really tough issues, everything from chronic illness and emotional issues to intimacy and sex. Today she's going to be talking with us about one of the most difficult issues: infidelity.

Welcome to the show, Mary Jo.

Mary Jo Rapini: Thank you. Thanks for -- great to be here.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you could join us. And I'm wondering -- infidelity. What got you interested in this topic? How did you start digging into it?

Mary Jo Rapini: Well, Lee, what happened was -- I'm an intimacy/sex therapist. And whenever you're dealing with intimacy and sex, you're dealing with couples. And over half of my couples that have marital problems are suffering from infidelity that happened in the past and they come to me broken. There's something you can tell within the relationship that is not right.

And then when Tiger Woods came out with his story, *People* magazine did a huge story on him and called to see if I would be their expert. So whenever you go in -- I was on their online page with Tiger and also in many of their different magazines and so I had to be really careful. So that's when I really dug into everything and compiled this list.

Because I do keep a list of what works and what doesn't. And notoriously, when people hear that there's infidelity they go through this checklist in their head and they want to kill the person, they want to go after the lover, and many times they say, "That's it; we're getting a divorce." And I'm just trying to prevent that.

I'm trying to give them space to have them breath and really think about this, because it is possible that you can end up with a closer marriage than ever after infidelity. And that's really the goal for what I do is trying to not only restore but to make the marriage better.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Well, yeah. And it's tough. I mean, you're dealing with really - - gosh, to even get it back to where it was has got to be challenging; but to get it back to even better, wow, that sounds all but impossible.

Let me ask you this. I want to follow up on that but I'm really curious. Do you find that more men -- or do you find that men and women cheat for different reasons or do they do it for the same reasons?

Mary Jo Rapini: That's a really great, great question, Lee. Basically, in my practice I have more women that cheat than men. And I'm not sure why that is because more of my patients are men than women. So I talk to other therapists and we found out, lo and behold, as many women cheat as men. It's just that usually, because of the way society treats women, because of the way we've been programmed, we understand it's incredibly taboo to do something like that, especially we're supposed to be so caring for the family. So women hide it more.

Women cheat more for a relationship. They tell themselves -- or they rationalize -- that this new person really cares for them, whereas their husband does not. Their husband may not pay attention to them and women will turn that into defending themselves by saying their husband never really loved them and this new person does.

So women are very, very -- most women would never tell me, "Well, I cheated but it didn't really matter. I mean, he didn't mean anything to me." Whereas men cheat more because they can. And they have a tendency not to think about the consequences. Women think about the consequences but they rationalize the reason that they're doing it is because this person really cares for them. Men don't do that so much.

And so when men tell their wives, "Listen, this woman meant nothing to me. I don't know why I did it. I was stupid," that's not a lie. Many times that's really true. She didn't mean anything to him and it certainly wasn't anything comparable to a relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, I can totally see that it's very different. You've got husbands looking at it one way, wives looking at it very differently. Do husbands and wives react -- I mean, obviously they have different reasons for getting into it. But when we get back home and it comes out, do husbands and wives react any differently to what's happened?

Mary Jo Rapini: I think because of the way men cheat that it's more a body, they're not that into the person emotionally usually, they're a little bit less likely to divorce. They're a little bit more likely to say, "Yeah, you screwed up. You made a big mistake." They're hurt but they don't take it as deep as women do.

We assume that the person he cheated with, that that person he loved, because that's how we are. We're very -- we get into a relationship with the person we cheat on. So when the husband actually says, "She didn't mean anything to me," that's almost an even bigger insult, that he would go out and make love with someone he didn't care about. And plus we really don't believe that; we think he's lying.

Lee Rosen: Right. Wow.

Mary Jo Rapini: So women react a little bit -- they're more likely to say, "That's it. That's a divorce and I'm not going to put up with this and I don't have to and it's just so hurtful." And they're the ones that have a little bit tougher time building that trust back, if I had to make a guess. And I don't have any literature to back that up; I'm just saying that that's what I see in my practice.

Lee Rosen: Right. Is there a particular -- is there something about certain people that makes them more likely to be sucked into a relationship with someone else, or to be interested in a relationship with someone else? Are there, like, preconditions that you see over and

over again that make somebody more vulnerable to this kind of thing?

Mary Jo Rapini: Well, you know, that's a great question, Lee. For my practice what I've really seen as being most poignant is going back and finding out what the parents of this spouse did. In other words, if you're married to someone and their parents -- one of the parents cheated on the other one, or they grew up with infidelity or divorce, they're a little bit more likely to cheat.

And I believe that's because -- you know, cheating behavior -- most of us grew up knowing right from wrong, but whatever our parents did or modeled for us, we take that. That's a strong tape in our head. And we tell ourselves, "Well my dad did that. How bad could it -- yeah, it was hurtful, but my dad did it."

I mean, it goes back to the type of thing if you watched it happen in your own family, you're more likely to act it out. And of course, most cheating is done as a sense of building up the self, the inner self. So if it's a person that is not as strong in their sense of self or feeling good about themselves, they're more susceptible to someone coming up and flattering them and really trying to get close to them.

If you're not happy in yourself, you're not going to be happy in your marriage. And then if someone comes along and is very sweet to you and compliments you and tells you the things you need to hear, I think you'd be a little bit more easily swayed.

Lee Rosen: Right. You'll fall right into that. Very interesting.

Mary Jo Rapini: Right.

Lee Rosen: What are the reactions that you see? When it comes out that somebody's been cheating and the spouses are now interacting, talking -- I guess talking is the best -- may be too pleasant a word, but arguing or whatever about it, what are the kind of knee-jerk reactions that you see people have to infidelity?

Mary Jo Rapini: Well, the biggest one is divorce, and unfortunately before thinking about what that's going to imply and what it's going to cause for generations to come, the problems with that. They seek a lawyer right away. And that's very hurtful and it's very harmful at this point because a divorce should be a really well thought out plan so the kids can do the best they can in a divorce. Nobody wins in a divorce. So that's the first thing.

And secondly, they try to get even. I've had a lot of spouses go out and flirt with somebody and get even that way. And of course, that's silly, it's hurtful, and it's not going to do anything except increase your risk of STD and just bring in another person that is basically going to have to be eliminated from the marriage once you start working on it.

So usually I can intercept that and I can explain that anybody can have an affair. And it is really true; it's so possible. Some people use that as an actual flattery, "Well, he really liked me. He came onto me and he wanted me." And I just want to set them straight, "Listen, he would want anybody that came along right now. This is the kind of person he is. He's very needy and he needs someone to make himself feel better." So usually I can talk them down from that.

And lastly, they want to go over to the lover's house and do some damage. And you really put a lot of people at risk doing that kind of thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Those are all situations that I see. And I agree with you, any of those things you do probably just make matters worse, not better.

Let me ask you this. How likely is it that a marriage will survive infidelity?

Mary Jo Rapini: You know, that is a great question, Lee. I think if couples really are committed to the marriage and not themselves or their own hurt, if they really have the understanding that this marriage is the life blood, that it is what they both created and above all else the marriage has to survive, I think they have an 80 percent chance of making it after infidelity. And I see that.

Out of my cases, only one-third of them actually go on to divorce, and those were couples that had had damage from years and years and years and years and nobody really worked on it. And then infidelity was brought to the forefront and that was the final straw. That did not need to break these couples but it did because they already were broken. The marriage was broken. It was limping or on life support, if you think of it in a human way. And when infidelity happened, they basically pulled the plug and that was it.

Lee Rosen: Right. It was already on the death bed. I hear you.

Mary Jo Rapini: Yeah. And I do think of divorce that way because I'm Italian, I'm an immigrant here, and I think one of the things that separates the Italians from the Americans is their strong commitment to

marriage and family. You know, a lot of it is the Catholic church but a lot of it too is they have an understanding of the woman within the home.

And this understanding of her is she feeds the life blood, is what they call it, of the marriage and so the marriage can never fail. Even if there is acting out or a lover, the marriage stays intact. It is so sacred. And it's kind of weird; there's a lot of support over in Italy for that type of a system. Over here there's none.

Couples talk about faithfulness and that's a wonderful thing to base a marriage on; however, it's not if you're not nurturing the marriage. Because if you're not nurturing the marriage then somebody is going to fail in that marriage at being faithful. It's inevitable.

So if you want a faithful marriage, you really, really have to nurture it. And if you have infidelity, even if you don't want to nurture it, you have to nurture it to build it back.

Lee Rosen: You know, when people are working with you and trying to rebuild the marriage after infidelity, what do you say to them when they ask about ongoing contact with the person that the spouse was involved with? How do you advise them about that?

Mary Jo Rapini: That's one of the first things that has to be terminated in the marriage. You have to make that cut. And I usually have whoever was the perpetrator, or the one that was having the affair, do it in a way that is either via phone or via e-mail and I include the other spouse on it. Like, in other words, both the other spouse and you -- the one who cheated -- are going to send this e-mail and you're going to sign both your names.

And then from that point you're going to cut off your e-mail address. You're going to only have one e-mail address; it's going to be something new. You're both going to share the same password. No more texting phone abilities; you get a phone that doesn't allow text. If you do need text, then you have to get an entirely new phone, new number, and that your spouse needs to know that they're the only texting you. You need to give them the phone every night so they can check it every day.

It makes -- what I'm going to try and develop is to build transparency into the marriage. In other words, the whole marriage now is going to be enclosed in glass. And I tell the couple, "You are both going to have to live like you are living in a glass house, at least for a while."

Lee Rosen: Don't you find that a lot of these spouses that are having affairs are going to work and seeing this other -- it seems like the only people I really meet are people at the office, so that makes it tough to do the transparent thing.

Mary Jo Rapini: It does make it tough. But as long as the other spouse knows they can contact them any time, and the spouse who was the cheater is going to check in with the spouse at home frequently throughout the day. And then they know their schedule, they're going to come right home. And the spouse is already in on the terminating that relationship and the e-mail has been already severed and a new e-mail established. So basically -- and then part of that too is them finding a counselor that they're going to work with.

I tell them upfront they're wasting their money and my time if they're going to go through the motions but they're not going to do this, because basically it's not going to work. And most of the ones that stay with me are really trying to work it. Like, they realize what happened and they want to salvage it.

Lee Rosen: One of the things I'm wondering is can you survive infidelity without a professional on the team? You're doing this all day, every day. I assume you see people -- are there people that can make it without help or do they really need a pro?

Mary Jo Rapini: No, you can't do it without help. It's not -- well, it is the counselor's guidance, but more than that it's the third party. And it's the third party calling the shots. If your wife calls the shots or husband calls the shots, one, it's not going to work. If the counselor calls the shots, you can both get angry with the counselor every once in a while but you're both following the counselor's advice.

And in my case, I keep reminding the cheater when they say, "This is too much. I feel like I'm a glass bubble. I feel like I don't have any rights."

I'm like, "You are in a glass bubble and you don't have any rights. And the reason you don't is because you lost them. You lost the ability to trust. You've proven only that you're seducible, that you cheat, and then you lie about it. And if you stop for a second and ask yourself, would you trust your spouse who cheated and lied and proved to you that they were seducible to another? Would you trust them?"

And usually the person will get it. There will be no response at that point.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's hard to argue with that. Put yourself in their shoes.

Mary Jo Rapini: Yeah. And I tell them right upfront, "Listen, you're going to try and pull your marriage back together and salvage it, so this isn't a time for you to be cocky or defensive. This is a time for you to be humble and open because that's what it's going to take to get this back."

They always -- what will really hold a couple together is usually, if everything else is gone, is the kids. And some people say, well, it's not okay to stay together for the kids. And I go, why not? I can't think of a more honorable reason to stay together. If you do it only for the kids, eventually -- if you're working this program -- you will start doing it for each other again too.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you mentioned some tips here. You've talked about cutting off contact. You've talked about this idea of the glass house, which I love -- the transparency in the relationship. You said you've got to get a counselor on board to help you with this. What other tips do you offer to people?

Mary Jo Rapini: Well, I tell them the very first tip is to just close all their borders, just like 9/11 with the U.S. When we got attacked, the first thing we did was we went to every border and closed it down, basically, and we stopped all air traffic. We honed in on each other.

And when this happens, when you hear about it, what I try to encourage couples is this is not a time to tell your friends, this is not a time to tell your mother or his mother. It's a time to get together to keep the house stable from rocking or blowing in the wind and to just come together and go, "Okay. What happened and what are we going to do about it?"

It allows the couple time to kind of breathe about it and to hear each other out. It's the first real venting session, if you will, but it's only between the two of you. That is the very first step and it doesn't involve a counselor. It involves the two of you coming together and admitting what happened and then trying to think, okay, what to do first. It's very important. You're building boundaries around you. And if you've ever watched marriages that make it, they do that almost symbolically.

And we do that as a USA protection. What's the first thing when there's some sort of a crime? They rope off the area. They don't want any intruders. And in a sense we do that in our own lives too.

Lee Rosen: Right. Absolutely. I definitely can see that. You've covered a lot of ground today. Let me ask you this. I know you are up to lots of things with your website and books. Fill us in on what you're up to.

Mary Jo Rapini: Okay. Well, I'm a syndicated columnist. I write two articles a week for the *Houston Chronicle* and then they syndicate it. And so the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post* seem to like them.

I have a show every Thursday on Fox called *Mind, Body and Soul with Mary Jo* and it's basically about love and relationships. I take call-ins and we do man-on-the-streets where we ask people what they think about infidelity and things like this.

And I also am on a show called *Big Medicine*; it was on TLC about obesity and patients that suffer from that and what that does to their psyche.

So I'm working a lot of different things. I'm an expert on the radio and TV nationally and a lot here in Houston.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for being with us today and giving us your insight into infidelity and how to survive it. That really is -- you've given a lot of good advice and I think people will put it to work. Thank you so much.

Mary Jo Rapini: I hope so. Thanks a million, Lee. I'm just so grateful you guys are doing this because there is no greater institution than marriage. And I really believe if we can build stronger marriages, we can build stronger families. And most of the problems we see in the world would be alleviated if we had strong families.

Lee Rosen: Couldn't agree with you more.

You can learn a whole lot more about Mary Jo at her website, MaryJoRapini.com. And of course I'll put a link to the website in the show notes at StayHappilyMarried.com. You can get information there about her practice, but also about her books and DVDs, this wonderful blog with great advice for couples and parents, all the articles she's writing, information about the TV appearances. Great stuff. Fantastic resources, especially for women.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope that you will join us again next week. We'll be back, just like we are. We post these shows every Monday afternoon. We'd love to hear your comments in the meantime. If you have a comment, feel free to call us on the comment line at (919) 256-3083 or e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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