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Overcoming the Monogamy Challenge

This is episode #115 of Stay Happily Married, "Overcoming the Monogamy Challenge."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by telephone with Marnia Robinson. She started out as a corporate lawyer, went to Yale Law School and did that work, but eventually figured out that her true calling was relevant to us here at Stay Happily Married. She's very interested in the study of intimate relationships. Now, her writing and research is helping couples understand the biological and the psychological issues that affect their relationship.

She and her husband recently published a book. It's called *Cupid's Poisoned Arrow: From Habit to Harmony in Sexual Relationships*. And today she's going to talk with us about one of the major topics of her study, how we can overcome some of the innate challenges to monogamy.

Before we jump in, let me tell you about her website. If you're like me, you love to kind of listen and look at the website at the same time. Unless, of course, I'm driving, and then I still sometimes try it. But the website is Reuniting.info. I'll mention that again at the end of the show.

But Marnia, I'm so glad you could join us. How are you today?

Marnia Robison: I'm fine. It's good to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, this whole topic of monogamy and "the monogamy challenge" is fascinating to me. I'm curious, you've done the research,

how common is it for couples to feel less satisfied with their marriages after that -- I sort of think of it as the honeymoon phase?

Marnia Robinson: Well, it's surprisingly common. In fact, here's a little story that really brought it home to me. A few years ago an Ohio State researcher set out to discover whether stress hormones rose during marital conflict. Now, I think she could have asked any of us that question and we could have told her that indeed they do rise, and that's what she found out.

But here's the interesting part. She wanted to isolate short-term stress, so she decided to work only with really happy newlyweds. She figured that way, when she had them argue for half an hour, she wouldn't be picking up stress-related neurochemistry from living with a grump for 20 years. So she took these newlyweds.

She and her staff interviewed 2,200 newlywed couples and they only took the top 4 percent -- that was 90 newlywed couples -- and they picked the most blissful, healthiest, wealthiest, most stable couples, the ones that you and I would have bet money would be living together forever.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marnia Robinson: Now, in following up with those couples she also discovered that across the board by the second year they were reporting decreased satisfaction in their marriages. And here was one of her little quotes was, "Declines in marital satisfaction appear to be a stable response to the first year or two of marriage." So that's scientist-speak for biology's program for pushing us apart had taken effect. And by the time she released her study, one-fifth of her blissfully, ideally suited couples had already divorced.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Marnia Robinson: So if any of us are finding marriage challenging, we're not alone.

Lee Rosen: That is amazing. That is a fascinating study. So what is it? Why are we -- what causes that? Is there nothing we can do about it?

Marnia Robinson: Well, there are some things you can do, but one of the biggest things we can do is understand the biological underpinnings of the problem. And I think there are really two.

The first is that honeymoon neurochemistry wears off within two years. You're on a sort of booster shot for the initial part of your romance, which is orchestrated by biology because it wants you to fall

in love, have a baby, and it wants both parents to stick around long enough to fall in love with the baby. So it's not about us living happily ever after, because we evolved living in tribes. So parents didn't really leave their kids even if they went and slept somewhere else. And I'll tell you in a minute why biology wants you to leave and sleep with somebody else.

But back to the honeymoon neurochemistry. That consists of extra things like adrenaline, dopamine -- that I've-got-to-get-it neurochemical you may have read about. It's in the news a lot in connection with addiction and so forth. Nerve growth factor; lower serotonin, so you feel obsessed with somebody. Testosterone does funny things too during that honeymoon period; it's a little bit lower in men and a little bit higher in women, which tends to sync up libidos better.

But Italian research has discovered that within two years all those levels are back to normal. So the good news is you're not feeling all wound up, but the bad news is that you're not as obsessed with your partner either and you're more susceptible to wandering elsewhere. So that's part one.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marnia Robinson: The second biological cause has to do with how we manage our sex lives. So here's a little story that'll kind of bring that home, at least it did for me.

Scientists took a group of monkeys, males and females, and they treated the females with hormones -- daily hormones. So these ladies were always in the mood. Now, you would think that would be monkey heaven, right?

Lee Rosen: Right. That's what I'm thinking.

Marnia Robinson: Well, over the next three and a half years what the scientists saw was that the males copulated with declining frequency and enthusiasm. So now you might think, well, they were just getting older. But what happened was, they took out those females, they put in other females who had been treated with the same hormones, and the boys were right back on the job.

Now, this is what scientists call the Coolidge Effect, this tendency to satiate ourselves sexually with one partner and then get a burst of neurochemistry when we have the option of fertilizing a novel partner. See, biology wants to make sure that no females are left unfertilized,

and this is one way it makes that happen. And this effect has been observed in female mammals too.

Now, in humans it's a little complex because we're also pair-bonders, and we'll get to that in a minute.

Lee Rosen: Wow. That is fascinating. A lot of biology here that -- I talk to so many mental health professionals and it seems so touchy-feely and subjective. But you're really -- you've dug in here and found out there are biological explanations for these things. That's fascinating.

Now, is either husband or wife -- is one or the other to blame for all of this?

Marnia Robinson: Well, I don't think so because it's our subconscious breeding program just doing its biological job. Our genes love it when we have kids with different partners. And here's why: If you have your children with different partners, their immune systems are going to be diverse from each other because they'll get a slightly different mix of immunity from each parent. So that means when bird flu sweeps through town, one kid is more likely to be able to survive than the other.

See, evolution really does not like monogamy. It likes the maximum amount of diversity because that improves the chances that your genes will make it into the future. So there really are no monogamous mammals. There are pair-bonding mammals. And that's only 3 percent of mammal species and we're in that weird group of pair-bonders. And that does have significance, as we'll talk about in a second.

This program serves our genes; it's not serving us. So we're actually better served by close, trusted companionship and lots of affection and touch. And although we're not to blame for getting sucked into this program, we can actually do some things to outsmart our genes and steer for long-term contentment.

Lee Rosen: Well, now, that's very interesting. So on the one hand we have sort of reasons -- I guess rational reasons -- to want to stay together and to make our relationships work out. But then you have this biology conflicting with that. And what does that look like in a marriage? How does that all come together?

Marnia Robinson: Well, it usually shows up as feelings of restlessness or irritability. It may start to seem like your partner doesn't want to please you anymore. Often couples' libidos go out of sync; one wants lots of sex, the other doesn't want any or some variation of that. Resentment then rears its ugly head, dissatisfaction. One of my favorites was I would get

the urge to remodel my mate; maybe you've had that happen to you. Harsh criticism.

Your sleeping goes out of sync sometimes; one partner starts getting up earlier and earlier and the other sleeps later or goes to bed at very different times, so you have less cuddle time. People start drinking more or spending more or gaining weight because they're looking for rewarding feelings elsewhere in their lives.

And of course, biology's favorite way this shows up is we start wondering if we married the wrong person or a new mate would be more loving and satisfying and we get these longings for novelty.

Lee Rosen: Fascinating. Boy, this is a whole different way of thinking about this and I am thrilled that you're here today. So when most of us are running into those issues you just raised and the marriage is not feeling right, we try different things to fix the problem. But it sounds like maybe we're missing the mark. We may be way off. What do you see people trying to do when they feel like the things are out of whack in their relationships?

Marnia Robinson: Well, they do try a lot of marriage therapies and self-help things and a lot of them are helpful but they aren't directly addressing these biological problems.

And one natural thing -- let's say your libido goes out of sync. Well, we're being encouraged to think in these terms -- at least, this seems to be the standard response of marriages. Counselors, "Oh, well, each person is responsible for their own sexual satisfaction." Well, that encourages partners to self-pleasure, get out their sex toys; or today's incredibly stimulating porn, always available at the click of a mouse.

And that actually is very risky because those kinds of stimuli aren't natural. They're not what your brain is geared up for. They're super-stimuli. And that can urge your brain to conclude that there's something really super valuable that you're doing, and it starts to numb the pleasure response of the brain. Well, then that makes regular sex seem less and less rewarding until your brain relaxes back to equilibrium.

So this can be -- in other words, it can leave partners feeling less satisfied, even though they're trying to scratch their itch harder.

And this same problem can actually show up just in normal sex. And by "problem," I mean there's lingering neurochemical changes after the big O that can change our mood for days and our perception of our partner.

So here were a couple examples because I've been talking to people about this for 20 years. And this is how one husband described it to me. He goes, "Oh, yeah. This makes sense." He said, "We have sex for 15 minutes and I'm grouchy for a week. And then I get sweet as honey when I get horny again." And women have reported similar problems.

One guy on a forum said, "Well, my wife turns into a major witch on occasion after a morning of really great sex. I'm talking multiple orgasms and it's two to three-hour session and the next morning I'm the anti-Christ in her eyes." And a woman he was writing this to on a forum replied, "Yeah, that happens to me too."

So I think we need to be more aware of how biology manipulates us in the bedroom because it really can shift how we start to see each other. And this is why we need to learn to manage sexual energy a little more carefully.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, because most of us just have no idea, I think, about any of the stuff that you're revealing for us. We're just clueless. That is i--

Marnia Robinson: Well, we seem to be living it but we're not drawing the right conclusions, perhaps.

Lee Rosen: Right. But when you say it, it's like, wow. It just starts to click. That is very, very interesting.

Okay. So you've given us a little bit of a clue of how you might sort of, I guess, overcome or address these biological obstacles to being happy and monogamous. I mean, obviously awareness is a piece of that puzzle. But what else have you learned? What else do we need to do to not end up in divorce court?

Marnia Robinson: Yeah. Well, the first thing is the point you made. We definitely have to do something different because we are programmed -- we're on a collision course with this problem. Now, not every couple will get caught; some are natural swans, but many of us are not and therefore we have to become more aware.

And just to recap, studies show that staying together in contented monogamy is a really smart thing to do. It's not smart to let your biology push you around just for genetic success. Trusted companionship is protective of health, both your psychological health and your physical health. Studies show this. Warm affections counter stress. In men too, lowers blood pressure and so forth. Kids do better with two caregivers in the home. And of course, one household is

cheaper to maintain than two. So there's lots of good reasons to figure out how to get this right.

The problem is, the part of the brain where these mating programs reside developed way before humans were even human. So it predates logic and you can't overcome these problems with will power. This part of the brain doesn't care what vows you made when you marched down the aisle. It doesn't even care about your best intentions. It runs on signals. And that means we have to understand the cues or behavioral signals that give us the urge to stay bonded, if we want to stay together. And I call these "bonding behaviors."

Lee Rosen: Okay. So what are like bonding behaviors?

Marnia Robinson: Well, I'll give you a few examples first and then I'll explain what they are and I can give you more details -- other examples after that.

But a bonding behavior would be something like skin-to-skin contact, gazing into each other's eyes -- which sounds corny but it was considered such a powerful practice; it was the basis of the entire courtly love tradition in the Middle Ages -- kissing with lips and tongues. What these behaviors do is they deliver a subconscious message that says "strengthen this tie."

And the reason they work is because they derive from basic mammalian infant caregiver attachment behaviors. To skip the jargon, the behavior that made you fall in love with your parents and that help you fall in love with your kids are where these behaviors come from.

Now, in lovers they look a little different, of course, but here are a few more and you'll see the parallels are evident. Wordless sounds of contentment and pleasure, like those "mmm" sounds. That goes directly to your limbic system, that primitive part of your brain that tells it, "Oo, this feels good; let's stay close." Stroking with intent to comfort. Touching and sucking of nipples and breasts; there's a reason that men like to do that.

And spooning, hugging each other in silence, placing a calming hand over your lover's genitals. Men actually explained this to me. If they're feeling very eager but it's not the right time, just having their lover gently touch them and hold her hand on their genitals will calm them down and they'll be taking deep breaths in no time.

Doing something generous without being asked for your partner, or listening intently and repeating back what you hear. Gentle intercourse; and the emphasis there is on gentle, and I'll explain that in a minute.

So only in rare pair-bonders like us -- as I said, we're in that 3 percent of weird mammals that pair-bond -- can adults use signals like these to sustain romance indefinitely. Most mammals, the mom raises them. All they need is mom's mammaries. They're ready to go in a few months and they're adults. Pair-bonders are needed in humans because our babies take a long time to mature. So these behaviors can let us sustain romance beyond that honeymoon neurochemical joyride that I was talking about earlier.

And the advantage to these kinds of rewarding feelings that come from these calmer activities is they don't numb your pleasure response, like too much self-pleasuring can.

So there are a few things you do need to keep in mind, though, about bonding behaviors. They have to be daily and they don't have to be long. That's the beauty of them. Just a minute or two of this kind of real intimacy between partners is enough to signal to that old part of the brain "this is a safe place to be; I want to get closer to this person." So these signals are less effective if you only use them rarely or solely in connection with getting to climax.

That's because there's a part of your brain called the amygdala and it is sort of like your inner defense mechanism. And these soothing behaviors cause it to release a neurochemical called oxytocin, that cuddle hormone, and that lowers your defenses. Well, you can't bond unless those walls come down, so it's really important to keep those walls down in a relationship so you don't start projecting wild things onto each other.

They're not foreplay, although they sound like it. If you think about it, foreplay's about increasing sexual tension. But these are about relaxing that old part of your nervous system. So foreplay's very goal-oriented; responding behaviors are not.

I could share a little historical trivia if you would find it interesting.

Lee Rosen:

Yeah, I would. And you know, I'm just fascinated by this because I really can see the connection between these bonding behaviors and the sort of evolutionary -- I don't know what you call it. But this whole approach you're taking, it's like, yeah, I can see how that would impact your brain and change the way you were feeling about the relationship. It is absolutely fascinating.

And what I also love about it -- and I'm sure you get this reaction -- but, gosh, this sounds easier than a lot of what we're told about how to make a relationship work.

Marnia Robinson: It is easier. And a lot of marriage therapies talk about these kind of behaviors but there's something about understanding where they came from and why they work that makes it easier to remember what they are and why you should do them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It's a chicken or the egg.

Marnia Robinson: Yeah. And it's great for men because you guys tend to be such great strategizers.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marnia Robinson: And once you know how something works, you're fine with doing it. But if you don't understand the reasons, it's really hard to stay motivated to do something. So men particularly --

Lee Rosen: Right. Do I have to look in your eyes again?

Marnia Robinson: -- respond very well to this.

Lee Rosen: Right. Oh, my goodness. It is -- yeah. Okay. So now your trivia. Where are we going with that?

Marnia Robinson: Oh, well, yeah. Because I've been -- you know, just put a book together on this, there were a few things that I found intriguing. It's a little veering off course, but other primates it turns out -- like the infamous bonobo chimps you may have heard of that are always running around rubbing their genitals on each other and macaque monkey -- they don't climax every time they engage in sexual play.

So it seems that for primates sex isn't just about fertilization. For us there's more. Sensual affection itself is very beneficial and helps us bond. So somehow we've gotten a little too focused on getting to the finish line there.

And it also turns out that there are historical traditions around the globe which recommended this very gentle intercourse approach without emphasizing orgasm, and taught that it was a way to improve health and harmony in couples. And it went by many different names all over the planet.

The Chinese called it Taoist dual cultivation. Sexual pioneers here in the United States a century ago called it *karezza*. In Europe it was called *amplexus reservatus*. So there's a whole history of really learning how to manage sex in a way that makes harmony just automatically happen. And those bonding behaviors are a key part of

it. And then the other part, of course, is get our feet off the accelerator a little bit with always getting so goal-oriented.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That is terrific advice.

Let me just jump in here and mention Marnia has this really neat idea where you can get a list of the bonding behaviors -- a bunch of them, 31 of them. Well, they're affectionate activities that are based on those bonding behaviors. And so when she went through the list I probably was listening; I heard 10 or 12 of them maybe. But lots of very practical ideas and advice.

All you need to do to get the list is to shoot an e-mail to feedback@reuniting.info and you'll get an e-mail back with those 31 affectionate activities. So that would be a terrific help, because obviously we're not going to make it through all 31. But that's a great, great way to get it.

So Marnia, is there anything else? I mean, we've covered a lot of ground but is there anything else we really need to know, other than to go read your book?

Marnia Robinson: Well, that's always a good idea, of course. Well, it makes me sad that I see mates putting so much sexual performance pressure on each other because the mainstream is trying to tell them their happiness lies on always getting to that finish line.

And the way our brains are set up, those strategies are backfiring after the honeymoon period. And it's confusing because they do seem to work during that honeymoon period but it's because you're all jacked up on all those extra neurochemicals so you don't feel the drop afterward as much. So the advice we're getting in the mainstream I'm afraid can often be creating lingering dissatisfaction and start to drive a wedge between couples.

So I'm really excited that there is this sort of lazy way to stay in love, but to benefit from it you really need to master those signals that soothe the brain and leave you feeling contented. And what I tell people is just experiment with bonding behaviors for a few weeks, because you may be surprised at how playful and satisfying your relationship is. It just becomes more lighthearted.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Marnia Robinson: And the other thing I'd like to say to people is when you get fed up with your partner, just stop and think, "Hey, biology could be behind this dissatisfaction that I'm blaming on the fact that he left his socks

on the bedroom floor again." You know, you always think that, "Oh, gee, I married the wrong person and I really need to go find Mr. or Ms. Right." But what's to stop biology from pulling your strings again the next time around?

Lee Rosen: Right. Oh, and I love that. It's not me and my socks; it's your biology.

Marnia Robinson: It goes both ways, of course.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'll definitely be using that. Marnia, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

Marnia Robinson: It was my pleasure.

Lee Rosen: You should definitely check out the book. It's *Cupid's Poisoned Arrow: From Habit to Harmony in Sexual Relationships*. And I'm going to order a copy this afternoon. I want to give a copy to my wife.

You can find out more about the book, also find out a lot of great information at Reuniting.info. I'll put a link to it in the show notes.

And I mentioned that whole e-mail idea. I'm about to do that now. Feedback@reuniting.info -- send an e-mail to that address and you will get a return e-mail with the 31 affectionate activities for couples. And it's all about the bonding behaviors. So do it.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I really appreciate you being with us and I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your comments, any feedback, suggestions, ideas. Terrific to hear from you.

You can reach our comment line at (919) 256-3083. We also read all of our e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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