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What Happy Couples Know About Marriage

This is episode #116 of Stay Happily Married, "What Happy Couples Know About 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 and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. If you're feeling that your marriage isn't all you expected, you're definitely not alone. I'm here by telephone with Harry Harrison. He's the author of *1,001 Things Happy Couples Know About Marriage*. And he's here today to share some of those secrets of a happy, long-lived marriage.

Harry's the author of 10 books on parenting and family life; one of them is a New York Times bestseller. And he's married with two grown kids of his own; that's always a good sign.

Harry, welcome to the show.

Harry Harrison: Thank you. I enjoy being here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited to be talking about the book. Before we even go too far, a lot of folks will listen to this show and they want to be looking at a website or looking at the book. Obviously, I found your book in two seconds on Amazon and on Google Books and that sort of thing, but where's the best way to go if they want to look at the book right now while we're talking about it?

Harry Harrison: Probably Amazon. My own website is RaisingParents.com and the book is on there. But it'll always take at Amazon.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Great. So if you want to kind of flip through the preview or whatever, go ahead and do it as we talk. I love to get a feel for that as we go.

Let me ask you something. You've written 10 books and this one is all about happy couples and marriage. What prompted you to write this one?

Harry Harrison: Well, after writing the other nine books on raising children, raising teenagers, and preparing kids for the adult world, it kept coming back to their home life and it kept coming back to the parents. And that of course kept coming back to their parents' marriage.

So the book kind of evolved. It was kind of the last book in a series, actually; the first book being raising children. And then it just kind of gradually -- as the book series progressed, the idea of writing on marriage, which is so fraught with issues to begin with --

It's just something I kind of put off but as I assimilated notes over about 10 years and talked to various husbands and talked to various wives and moms and dads, the book kind of evolved as, well, this is the natural book now to write.

Lee Rosen: Right. It sounds like it just sort of had to come out. You had so much data collected and so many thoughts, listening to all the folks you'd been talking to, it sort of had to be written.

What are some of the things -- you're interviewing all these folks and you're learning all about dealing with kids but learning a lot about marriages. Where were some of the most common issues that you were seeing with couples, especially those that were having trouble with their marriage?

Harry Harrison: Well, the most interesting thing was -- is how we as married couples today define love. And we think love is just this romantic thing that's kind of like puppy love, that when we're in high school we meet the girl of our dreams or the man of our dreams and we have that wonderful warm feeling and that that love is something we will experience through our entire marriage, 40 or 50 years.

And that's probably one of the greatest problems, that when somebody wakes up about eight weeks after the honeymoon and looks over at their husband or their wife and goes, "Oh, man. I don't feel the same way I did eight weeks ago." Or it happens a year later or two years later.

They think something's wrong and they don't understand that that's just one of the natural evolutionary things about marriage is that you're not going to keep that high school immature puppy love feeling. So they think -- they don't see "love" as a verb that is something you do; they think it's something that happens. But "love" is a verb; it's something you do.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I hear that all the time. What are some of the warning signs that you're seeing that say, hey, this marriage is really in trouble?

Harry Harrison: Well, there's really a lot of them. When you think of -- when you see couples that -- and my wife and I have had dinners -- we'll be out with a couple and some things will happen. We'll look at each other and go, "Holy cow. What's going on in this family?"

And one thing is like anger, is that the husband or the wife will be just this anger that comes out and this hostility, whether it comes out as criticism or comes out as rage or comes out as this continued putting down somebody. It's pretty easy to figure out, well, there's some unresolved issues in that marriage.

And the ability to forgive is one of the key building blocks for a marriage. But a tendency to hang on to hurts that happened a year ago or five years ago or something -- you can drag out an argument that happened 10 years ago and the other person is going, "What are they talking about now?"

Lee Rosen: Right. You've got your list and you're dredging it up.

Harry Harrison: You've got your list and you're just not going to let it go and it just keeps -- that anger kind of turns into bitterness and it's hard to keep bottled up.

Another warning sign that we've seen with couples is if there's abuse of alcohol or drugs or gambling or sex or porn. That's something that may not be reflective of the couple's situation in the beginning but a married couple consists of two really strong individuals. And if one individual is cracking under the problem of addiction then the marriage is going to wobble. And we've seen it with -- it could be an alcohol addiction. It could be a spending problem. But something has happened to one of the partners that can kind of shake the marriage's foundation.

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Harry Harrison: You know, another thing that happens that people don't think about is, like, separation. If a husband or wife has to travel a lot or has to go -- I

mean, you see it with Army and Navy couples all the time. A couple gets married and then the husband is sent out on a submarine for eight months and he's an officer so he's going to be gone -- this is going to be their lifestyle for six years. So if someone's home alone all the time, even in the best situation that's going to be problematic.

Lee Rosen: Very tough. And you see that not just in the military but so many folks have these jobs like technology jobs where they fly out on Sunday night and come home on Friday night.

Harry Harrison: And a marriage is something that has to be nourished. It's a living thing. And if you're not there to nourish it then it can just die a natural death. It takes a real extraordinary commitment to a marriage if there's going to be long-term separation over a long-term period of time for that marriage to stay together.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Harry Harrison: When I used to travel a lot for -- I was in advertising for a long time and I would be sent on these TV commercial shoots for three weeks, four weeks at a time. And I would regularly just bring my wife. I would just bring her with me. And I'm really kind of surprised that a lot of couples don't do that. I mean, she didn't have a job so she was free to travel.

Lee Rosen: Well, see, and I think that's the thing is today the average couple both have a job. The economy is such that if they can find jobs, they both need jobs.

Harry Harrison: Well, and that's a problem. And again, that's something that you have to decide what's going to come first, a bigger house or the marriage?

Lee Rosen: Right. That is a very interesting way to put it. Yeah. Do you want to have this big house you end up dividing in your divorce or do you want to keep your marriage?

Harry Harrison: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Hadn't thought of it that way before. Yeah. Well, that's an interesting point. And I don't know if that one's in the book or not. But the book is filled with that sort of really practical little thought that -- I mean, I sat there and I -- in reading the book I felt like sometimes you had reduced down what might have been a chapter in somebody else's book down to a sentence. And you really caught it. And that's sort of the kind of sentence that -- it's like, you might be trading your marriage for that big house. It's very interesting the way you did that. You have a real talent for pulling that out.

When you were doing the parenting books and you're watching all these families, did you see people -- I mean, I guess you learned a lot of lessons by watching them try different things with their marriages that were working or weren't working?

Harry Harrison: Over a 10-year period I ended up meeting a lot of dads -- well, I wrote a book on raising sons. I wrote a book on raising daughters. And I don't have any daughters and it was a daughter book that hit the bestseller list on the New York Times. And people would say, well, how'd you do that?

Well, I interviewed dads. I interviewed, like, 40 of them. And we would talk about their daughters but it would always come back to the wife. And the same thing on raising sons. I mean, I knew a lot of men, I interviewed a lot of men, and the fathers and sons it was critical that -- that relationship between father and son. But at the same time, if the marriage was shaky and it made the father shaky then it all starts spiraling out of control. So it always kept coming back to the marriage itself.

And even if there was a divorce, if the husband and wife could maintain a good relationship, however that's defined in their divorce, then the impact on the kids was less. There's always going to be an impact. A divorce is always going to cause impact. But it could be lessened if the father respected the mother and the mother respected the father.

Lee Rosen: Interesting. You know, I was reading an article the other day and it made the point -- I think a lot of people think that you learn a lot from your failures. But this article said you learn more from your successes than you do from your failures, which I thought was an interesting thought. But that's really what your book is. Your book is lessons in success. Would you define it that way?

Harry Harrison: Yeah. I think that there's so much that goes into marriage. When a young couple gets married today -- and Al Gore's proved marriage is something you can do for 40 years and still not get it right.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It's probably the only thing you can do that long and not get it right, really.

Harry Harrison: And not get it right. I know. It's just very strange. But I think what happens with couples today is there's a huge emphasis on the wedding. There's just a gigantic emphasis on the wedding.

And I was reading the New York Times website today and there was an ad for the American Gym Society and it shows this girl grabbing her mouth and the headline is "Hear 'yes' whispered through tears of joy. Find the perfect engagement ring." Like that's the key to a happy marriage. People will spend \$100,000 on a wedding and not a dollar on couple consulting. So we have a society where so much emphasis is put on the wedding.

And the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, well, like you can find this -- it's all romance and it's all joy and vacations in wonderland. And then you get to the marriage. And that's where everything kind of falls apart because our young people today are just -- their wedding is everything and they don't think about their marriage.

So my book, *1,001 Things Happy Couples Know About Marriage*, is to say this is what experienced couples, this is what long-time married couples have learned about staying married. A lot of long-term marriages start with just a real simple ceremony. Somebody goes down to the courthouse and gets married. I mean, those marriages have even a better chance of lasting than these huge productions that are two years in the making.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. You make the -- when I was reading through the book, one of the points is that you need to know that not having -- you'll hear people say a lot, "We don't have enough money to get married." You make the point, well, it's getting married; you can get married for \$50. Having enough money is not an excuse.

But then you sort of do the other end of things. You say, the \$100,000 you could have spent on a wedding could have been a huge payment on your first house, if not entirely pay for the first house.

Harry Harrison: And wouldn't it make a huge difference?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Harry Harrison: So you have all these photographs of this \$100,000 wedding and you're trying to make rent in a \$1,000 a month apartment. And of course, one of the biggest strains on a marriage is finances. Now, I say it costs \$50 to get married and that's true, but finances can rip apart a marriage, especially if a couple is on different planets. I mean, if he thinks he has all the money in the world and doesn't mind running up credit and he doesn't mind spending more than he makes, and she's a saver, then you're going to have -- that's going to be an issue.

The conflict is that when a young couple gets married, theoretically both of them are in the same economic place. They're starting out their

lives and they build a life together. Some things that can interrupt that thought process, though, is like some couples will get in trouble and they think, "Well, what will save us is a baby," which is the stupidest thing, if you think about it, that a baby will bring a couple together, because a baby can really -- that can upset the whole thing.

Now we have a third mouth to feed. Maybe she can't work but she has to work. So now you've got daycare. Now you've got constant expenses of raising a child. You've got the problem of not being able to sleep throughout the night; you're getting four hours of sleep. And the strain of a child that should be -- having a child should be a glorious thing but it becomes this real bagger in a marriage if they couldn't afford it.

So finances play a big part.

Lee Rosen: Right. May end up making it worse, not better. Yeah. Absolutely.

Well, you've broken the book out into -- and you're getting into it now. You're talking about the wedding and you're talking about the kids. The book is broken into sort of 20-ish chapters covering really -- it really does cover the 50 years, doesn't it? I mean, it's kind of beginning to end.

Harry Harrison: I think it covers all the aspects and changes that a marriage -- and issues a marriage faces. And I don't want to say "issues," but certainly having children is something a marriage, a couple, has to deal with. And deciding on the importance of faith in a marriage, that has to be dealt with. And problems that will come up in a marriage, like someone losing their job or someone having to travel or that kind of thing.

I mean, all the chapters deal with realities in a marriage. I think it's better than to say "issues;" it deals with realities in a marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. No, realities is a good point. And it's funny because on the one hand the book is kind of light and easy. It's like the perfect gift to somebody that's getting married. It'd be just a terrific thing to give to somebody.

But in a way it's light and easy because it's written in such a way that it's basically these thoughts sort of one at a time, these things that happily married people know. But it's funny because another book might have literally turned one of your items into a chapter, but it's like they're doing all the thinking for you in their book. And in your book the thing you ought to know makes you do the thinking and in a way it's almost more impactful.

I mean, I really -- I have to say I love the way you did it. You really do make people think about the decisions they're making with the way you laid the book out.

Harry Harrison: Well, I appreciate that. I try and write -- the kind of books I write have been described as wisdom books. And being wisdom books, I'll give the nugget of truth or the kernel of truth and people need to think about what it means to them.

And that's what -- to me, that's the kind of book I need. I need to read something that says, this is something you need to think about. Now, I'm not going to tell you the answer, but you need to think about it.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Harry Harrison: And men really -- when I started writing books I really first started writing them to men. And men kind of like "give me the facts and then let me think about it." So that's the way my books were written. My very first book was written -- was just a very kind of book of proverbs, book of wisdom, about raising sons. And this is kind of a book of wisdom about a marriage.

And after the first couple books that I wrote towards men, really I was getting letters from women and moms saying, "Well, we kind of like this kind of book too. Can you write something for mothers and write something for wives?" Which kind of surprised me because when we were about to have our first child my wife bought all kinds of books on raising children that were written to women, 700 pages, 600 pages. And she'd say, "You need to read this book about raising children."

I'd go, "I just can't. You read it and when we have a son then I'll defer to you."

And I think that's the way most men do because the books just seem so long and tedious. So I wanted to write something that men would read and that they could apply their lives. And it turned out that women kind of liked that same style too.

Lee Rosen: Well, and it's -- I mean, all I know is what I like. And I look at so many books when we're preparing for these shows and I end up looking at the table of contents and I flip through and I'll find a chapter that looks interesting to me.

With your book I read the first sentence and just kept going. I mean, it really -- because it's so digestible and easy and interesting and I never would have thought that within the first few pages I could read these little pieces of advice and find myself smiling and then 30 seconds

later find myself tearing up. I mean, you really have a very powerful way of doing that.

Let me ask you, when you look back at all these 1,001 things you've learned and you've put together in this book about how a marriage can last and can work, what jumps out at you as the top couple that it's like, boy, you better know this because this is one of the big, big, big keys to making your marriage work?

Harry Harrison: I think that -- I keep going back to how love is a verb. I think that what really struck me in researching the book was how many arranged marriages in other countries and in other cultures -- how many arranged marriages last a lifetime. That just kind of knocked me out.

A lot of times the man -- and I'm not espousing arranged marriages, but I just thought it was fascinating how a man and woman that had never met could be -- their families would put them together and then they would have a lifelong marriage.

So it kind of struck me how love is -- the idealized, Hollywood version of love gets in the way of a long-term marriage, where a couple can wake up in the morning and they can just decide to love each other that day. And they can love each other through -- they had an argument the night before or his hair's gotten too long or whatever, that you can actually shape your marriage by your thoughts. If you decide you're going to love your wife that morning, you will love your wife. I think that's one absolute key.

The other thing I've seen in happy marriages is that individuals don't try and win every argument. That's something that when you first get married you think, "It's important that I'm right." But over a period of time you learn it's more important to be happy than right. And I used to think that winning every argument would make me happy, but that didn't.

And I think that couples learn that, that winning every argument doesn't make them happy, that you can win an argument and your partner can be furious or unhappy or guilty. And so what have you done? I mean, you really haven't -- you have name-scoring points.

So couples who are married and in a happy marriage, winning arguments is not that important to them. I think they cut the partner some slack. They don't call attention to every fault. They don't call attention to every mistake. They don't call attention to every time the dinner doesn't taste right or every time they drive too fast. I mean, I think they cut each other slack throughout the day.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Harry, I appreciate you being with us today and sharing some of these 1,001 secrets that couples know about marriage. Thank you so much.

Harry Harrison: Thank you. It's been a great honor to be here.

Lee Rosen: You know, if you want to learn more about Harry's book you should -- personally, this is a book that is not going to sit on the shelf. Some of these books, you buy them, you think you're going to read them, and you just don't get around to it.

This is a book you're going to pick up. You're going to find yourself reading the minute you get it, in the car, on the way home, because it's accessible. It's easy. It's interesting. It's powerful stuff. *1,001 Things Happy Couples Know About Marriage*. You can get it on Amazon. I'll put a link to it in the show notes but I'm sure you can pick it up just about everywhere.

You can also find out more about Harry and his other nine books, including the New York Times bestseller, at his website RaisingParents.com. I'll also put a link at Stay Happily Married for that.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I really appreciate you being with us. I hope you will be back with us next week. In the meantime, if you have any comments, suggestions, feedback, ideas, you name it, you can reach us at our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We read them all. We respond to them all. We love to hear from you.

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

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