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## Living up to Sexual Standards

*This is Stay Happily Married #117, "Living up to Sexual Standards."*

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We all live in a society that seems to be I guess almost obsessed with sex and that tells us there are all these ideals we're supposed to be living up to. It can definitely have a big impact on our relationships.

I'm really excited to be joined in the studio by Dr. Sara Rosenquist. Sara is a clinical psychologist in Cary, North Carolina, who, in addition to her general practice, specializes in reproductive health issues and sex therapy.

She has a website and I want to go ahead and give you the URL for that in case you want to look at it while you listen. It's [DrSara.com](http://DrSara.com). So you might want to check that out as we go along here.

Sara is not only an expert on sex -- and I'm excited about digging into that -- but she's a language person. She speaks English, Spanish, French, Italian. I'm going to stick to English today since I'm not a language expert and that's the only one I know.

Sara, welcome to the show.

Sara Rosenquist: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really glad you could be here to sort of dig into this whole sex topic. You know, I'm curious, we live in this sort of hypersexual

culture and I'm wondering what kind of impact or effect you've seen from the culture's emphasis on sex on relationships.

Sara Rosenquist: Well, as you may know, our expectations inform a whole lot about how we approach life and what we get back from it. In our culture we seem to expect sex to be Hollywood quality throughout a relationship. And yet, A, we don't select our mate for long-term in terms of what it takes to keep a quality relationship going for the duration; and B, we expect our relationships to be the "best friend" relationship.

And one of the things that we know about sexual intensity is that the mystery and the otherness of our partner is what keeps it charged. So when we have a "best friend" relationship, it's really hard to keep that charge at the same level as it was during courtship and at the same level as our culture expects it to be.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It is. It's very confusing. And it's interesting you talk about the Hollywood quality. It feels like the movies set so many expectations for us about a lot of things in our lives and it sounds like this is just another one of those things and it's a pretty big thing.

Do you see people with sort of -- I guess when you see the folks with unrealistic sexual expectations, does that affect that person's self-image and their behavior and all of that?

Sara Rosenquist: Often times it does.

Lee Rosen: Well, how does that carry over into their relationships?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, one of the ways that it carries over into the relationships is it can often lead to sort of a demand situation where sex becomes conflicted out of one partner. Generally it's one, sometimes both -- not always the woman, but often -- feeling like all touch becomes a signal that intercourse and orgasm must follow.

And when that happens, that partner that's experiencing the demand will often shut down sooner and affection begins to drop out of the relationship. Sensual touch that isn't sexual begins to drop out of a relationship.

And the most vibrant relationships are the ones where there's lots of touch, lots of affection, lots of sensuality and not a lot of demand that touch should always lead to intercourse and orgasm.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes me wonder. Like, when you're doing your work with couples and that's the problem, do you ever just -- do you come up with systems or rules and say, "Okay. There will be no sex for a certain amount of time and we'll touch but it won't go anywhere"? Or how does that play out from a practical standpoint when you're helping people with these issues?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, often times I will ask them to abstain from sex for, say, a week, just to see what happens when they can be affectionate and sensual and not have intercourse.

Lee Rosen: I'll bet the husbands are thrilled with that suggestion.

Sara Rosenquist: Yeah. They tend to not like it too much. But when they comply they're grateful because when they comply they get really good results.

The other thing I'll do sometimes is not ask them to abstain from intercourse for a whole week but to set aside a little bit of time, maybe 15 minutes in the morning before they rush out the door, to hold each other in a full frontal embrace, naked. And no matter what comes up, intercourse isn't going to happen because you've got to run off to work.

What that does --

Lee Rosen: These people obviously don't have flexible work schedules.

Sara Rosenquist: Right. Yeah. If they have a flexible work schedule we might have to be more creative. I might have to mix up my instructions. But I'm just telling you what I do sometimes.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Sara Rosenquist: So sometimes, if they can do that for 15 minutes, they begin to experience one another's heartbeat. They begin to experience the breath on their neck. That starts to be sensual and to feel very safe. The first time any of us knew that we were loved was when we were a brand-new baby and we were placed on somebody's chest and we felt that heartbeat.

So at one level I'm wanting to recreate that sense of safety and love, and another level I'm wanting people to begin the day thinking about their mate in an affectionate way but also in a little bit of arousal that sort of wafts through the brain throughout the day so that you might have some sexual thoughts during the day and have to put them aside to go ahead and attend to business. But when you

do that, it sort of builds up the sexual tension and the expectancy of reunion as being a positive thing.

And then if I can get them to expand their repertoire of affectionate behavior, of sensual behavior that doesn't have a demand, often times that can be very helpful.

Lee Rosen: You know, it's funny. I'll bet your practice is just booming because there's something for everybody in your approach. We've got the no sex for a week, which is going to make some spouses happy; and then we've got the lying around naked every morning approach. So it sounds like win-win.

But seriously, let me ask you this. When we look at what's going on with sex and we look at marriages, does sex -- is it really the source of a lot of problems in relationships or is it just a symptom of the problems in relationships? Is it chicken or the egg?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, there's a little factoid that's really very interesting, and that is that when sex is happening in a long-term relationship, plain vanilla sex, just regular sex, just satisfying, feeling loved, feeling cared about, having release, it only accounts for about 15 percent of marital happiness. That's not a lot. No wonder people who are happily married think it's not all that important or all that big a deal.

But what happens when you take it out, when you either have no sex happening in a relationship or it becomes conflicted, is that it jumps up to 75 percent of marital unhappiness.

And there's a growing literature on involuntary celibacy. In the course of a lifetime you can expect that most adults will have about 19 years, plus or minus, maybe not all in one run, of celibacy. That may be before you're married by choice, it may be during marriage when somebody becomes ill or the relationship becomes conflicted, or for whatever reason the partner isn't available.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very interesting. Yeah. I thought that was fascinating what you say. When the marriage is working out, 15 percent of the satisfaction is sexually related; but when it's not working out, it can become a huge factor in the dissatisfaction. Is dissatisfaction with sex -- all these issues around sex -- do husbands and wives talk about them or is this the kind of thing that doesn't really come to the forefront of the discussion?

Sara Rosenquist: Often times they don't talk about them. And often times if they do, they don't talk about these issues productively. In other words, I see

a lot of people who will suffer in silence for a long time, and then when they do finally talk about it they do so in a negative way; a way that their partner can't really hear without feeling accused or attacked; a way that doesn't lead to problem solving, doesn't lead to the real issue of feeling loved and appreciated in the most primitive way, which is that tactile, kinesthetic mode of knowing that we have.

Lee Rosen: Got you. So do you see people trying on their own -- I mean, obviously they're coming to you and at that point they're really seeking professional help from an expert. But what are they doing at home before they come to you? What sort of approaches do you see your patients and clients taking that they've tried? How are they trying to do this on their own? Are there ideas that work or that don't work?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, a lot of times they're trying lingerie, they're trying toys. And there's nothing wrong with either of those things; it's just that by itself it's not likely to be a long-term solution. A lot of times somebody eventually gets on the Internet and -- whether it's in chat rooms or it's on pornographic sites, they get in trouble either at the workplace or at home and that's when they come to me. And that's when we begin to really talk about the issues in a way that can be more productive.

Lee Rosen: So you're looking -- those sort of solutions they're coming up with maybe are short-term solutions. They don't really get at the underlying problem. You're looking for more of a long-term, real solution that's going to make this relationship work out and get back on track.

What do you do? When they come to you what kind of approach do you take with them?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, I take the approach that there are four pathways to desire, four bridges to desire. One of them is visual, and we know that men are more visual but not exclusively visual. And women are not totally uninterested in visual aspects of stimulation. But it's one of the pathways and only one.

The other is emotional connection. Emotional connection is important but it's just one of the pathways.

Another pathway is sensate focus, or the ability to really focus on your own body, your own body's sensations. A lot of people are very compartmentalized. They may have been taught that sex is bad or wrong, or that touching their body was dirty, or whatever -- any

number of reasons that they're not totally pleasurable present to their own body and to their partner's body.

And finally, the fourth bridge to desire is erotic imagination. And couples can learn to be playful together instead of being dry and serious and having sex be a duty or a chore, that sort of thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you do you come at this from all four of these -- with all four of these approaches in mind? Is that how you're dealing with it?

Sara Rosenquist: Exactly. If your car is a four-cylinder car and all cylinders are working, it's going to function much better than if one of your cylinders just isn't kicking.

Lee Rosen: I love that analogy. You want to have all your cylinders working. Okay.

Sara Rosenquist: Yes, sir.

Lee Rosen: So how do you approach each of those four things? What's that about?

Sara Rosenquist: Well, that will depend on the individual couple. And it's part of the process that unfolds in therapy. I do try to be very strategic and very targeted in my therapy, which is why I don't keep patients for a very long time. We usually get our work done in -- I don't know -- 6 to 12 sessions. That would be under the bell curve; it's not a guarantee, obviously. There's a whole lot of variability. But by being more targeted and more strategic, I can be more effective in helping the couple get their goals met sooner.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very interesting. So your approach, you're working on each of the four things. You're pulling it together. What are you seeing happen with your approach? I mean, 6 to 12 sessions doesn't sound like that long. It sounds like a pretty quick kind of, hey, we've got a problem; we're coming in to see an expert. And next thing you know things are working out.

What do things working out -- what's that look like? What's happening when things are back on track?

Sara Rosenquist: When things are back on track the couple has a lot of affection, a lot of sensuality, a lot of variety in how they express affection, sensuality, and more variety in how they experience sexuality in their relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. Who's calling you mostly? Who's making the appointment? Who's initiating this thing? Is it more the husbands or the wives on this issue?

Sara Rosenquist: On this issue, as in all issues with therapy, it's usually the wife who makes the call. But not always. I've recently put my calendar online. And by having the possibility for the patient to book an appointment directly online, I've gotten more men to make appointments.

Lee Rosen: Interesting.

Sara Rosenquist: And in one case recently, a man who was on the verge of divorcing his wife for not wanting to have sex with him, made the appointment for her.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Yeah. That is fascinating because guys do like to log in and click buttons and make things happen. That is absolutely fascinating.

What else do we need to know? What other things are important for us to know about you and your practice?

Sara Rosenquist: On the weekend of July 24th I will be collaborating with Life Coach Smokie Sizemore to do a workshop called "Getting Your Sexy Back." And this is going to be at Mariner's Landing in Virginia. It's a resort. And you can find more information about this at [MarinersLanding.com](http://MarinersLanding.com).

Lee Rosen: Okay. Great. That's sounds fascinating. "Getting Your Sexy Back." What are we looking for there? What's going to happen to folks that decide to go to that workshop?

Sara Rosenquist: We will be talking about sex. We will be talking about life. We will be talking about values. We will be broadening our definition of what is sensual and sexual so that it's not just genital and it's not all just focused on intercourse and orgasm. When we got overly focused, that's a lot of times when we kind of lose it.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Dr. Sara Rosenquist, thank you so much for taking the time to be here today. I appreciate it.

Sara Rosenquist: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You should definitely check out Sara's website. It's at [DrSara.com](http://DrSara.com). I'll put a link to that in the show notes, of course. And you'll learn more about her services.

And, hey, you can click on that button and set up that appointment. I love that idea. I think this is the first mental health professional we have talked with that has that as an option and that really -- I love that idea.

She's got some great articles on the site, a bunch of free resources, definitely worth checking out.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will come back and join us again next week. In the meantime, we love to hear your comments, your feedback, your suggestions, your ideas for upcoming shows. You can reach us on our comment line at (919) 256-3083, and we read and respond to all of our e-mail at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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