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Three's a Crowd: Dealing with your Spouse's Ex

This is Stay Happily Married #125, "Three's a Crowd: Dealing with your Spouse's Ex."

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.

You know, they do say that three's a crowd. And if your new spouse has been married before, there's a good chance that a crowd is something you'll have to learn to accept and deal with.

Dr. Molly Parks is here with us today to give us some insight into this complicated family situation and to give us some tips on how we can keep the harmony. Molly's a psychologist from with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. She has more than a decade of experience working with people of all ages. She's a member of both the American Psychological Association and the American Family Therapy Academy, where she's a part of the human rights and social justice committee. She helps people find balance in their lives. And she does fun things, like hiking and cooking and gardening to help her keep balance in her own.

Molly, this is your first show with us and I'm really excited to have you. Welcome to the show.

Dr. Molly Parks: Thanks so much, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Three really is a crowd. I have a number of close friends that are married to people that have former spouses, and it does seem like that just -- it's probably the trickiest thing that I ever see people have to deal with. Do you think I'm right about that?

Dr. Molly Parks: Yes, absolutely. I think it's a really hard thing to prepare ourselves for because you aren't choosing a relationship with this ex-spouse. This is someone who you're forced to start to interact with. So it's difficult to anticipate how you're going to get along or negotiate co-parenting or other responsibilities together.

So you're really entering into a relationship here like you mentioned with a third person who you'll have to interact with, kind of like a new family member, potentially indefinitely.

Lee Rosen: Do they know what's coming? You know, you're dating this person and everything's hunky-dory, but you know that ex-spouse is out there and you probably hear about them some. But do they properly appreciate what it's going to be like to be in this three-way relationship?

Dr. Molly Parks: Again, I think it's hard for anyone to anticipate what this relationship is going to be like. So to say this person has mentioned this person is out there, you don't know what their personality is. This isn't a friend that you get to say, I want to be friends with you, or I don't. You're kind of forced into this relationship.

And it can be a nice, amicable relationship. We do see that happen. But it can also be a difficult and tumultuous relationship when the personalities don't meld well.

Lee Rosen: Right. I wonder, I would assume it's more challenging when former spouses have kids, that they're having to negotiate over kid stuff and that complicates your new marriage, but maybe not. You tell me.

Dr. Molly Parks: Absolutely. I think the emotional history that your new partner sharing children with an ex brings is a huge dynamic in this. So that is going to be also the physical tie that keeps that person in your life moving forward. So sharing the responsibility of children with your new family and this ex-partner is definitely going to add some difficult dynamics moving forward.

Lee Rosen: I'm just curious; do you see very many cases where the no-kid ex-spouse really is a big problem in the new relationship, or is it mostly the families with the kids?

Dr. Molly Parks: Well, again it depends on the couple. Yeah, I think we see ex-spouses who have trouble letting go of the relationship if it was not their choice to leave the relationship. They potentially can kind of hang on and try to reengage with their ex. And that can be a problem for people trying to move forward in a new relationship.

But I would say primarily we see issues around the co-parenting of children.

Lee Rosen: The one thing that comes to mind for me when I think about these complications -- even when there aren't kids, sometimes there's this ongoing financial obligation from one spouse to the other, and that seems to make it tricky. And my experience is that kind of drives the new spouse sometimes berserk, that their spouse is having to pay their former partner money every month. So I guess in a way it's like kids, money, and people that don't disconnect are what you're dealing with.

Dr. Molly Parks: Yes. Kids, money, and emotions.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, what kind of strain do you see it put on a relationship when an ex is still involved in your spouse's life? What do you see happen there?

Dr. Molly Parks: You know, Lee, I think jealousy is really a driving primary emotion that we see. This is someone, this ex-partner, who has shared a huge part of your new partner's past in a really intimate way. And this is obviously especially true as we talked about when children are involved. This is an ex who shares with your partner the most important things in their lives, which is their kids. And it's hard for us to swallow this as human beings. It takes a great deal of emotional maturity and I think self-confidence, especially early in a relationship, to feel confident in your relationship with their ex is still in the picture.

And with kids involved, I think another potential strain is managing different parenting styles. So you're coming into a family that, even though the partners are separated now, already have a set way of dealing with conflict, discipline, and that kind of thing. It can be stressful to navigate or negotiate their way versus your way.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do you see many spouses where the ex-spouse kind of blows up at the new spouse? Or if there's going to be conflict, is it usually former spouse to former spouse?

Dr. Molly Parks: I think it can happen that way. It really depends on the kind of emotional maturity, the emotional volatility of the people involved in the relationship. So I think sometimes the ex-spouse is the one that causes trouble; that is, bringing a lot of jealousy to the table.

But sometimes it's the new spouse, struggling with their new partner, talking about the ex-spouse, struggling with seeing maybe even their new partner and the new partner's ex getting along and

doing well at co-parenting. So jealousy can really happen on either end.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's complicated. I hadn't even thought about that. You've got jealousy popping up in a variety of different ways.

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah. And I think it's important to keep in mind that for everyone involved, navigating this balancing of parenting styles and just navigating a new family system is a difficult transition for all parties. And I think it's helpful to think of this as we're all in this together to help the transition be less stressful.

Lee Rosen: Right. What are sort of the do's and don'ts of this whole thing for the person who's coming into this; the new spouse -- especially when there are kids, I guess -- but what kind of things should you be thinking about and conscious of and try not to mess up?

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah, absolutely. Some tenants that I would think of -- I think it's really important to remember that just as jealousy is coming up for you as the new partner, it's likely also coming up for your spouse's ex. And you're now involved in their children's lives and are a significant role model for these kids, and this ex didn't get to have a say in choosing you, just like you didn't have a say in choosing them. So this can be a hard pill to swallow. And if you can be sensitive to these emotions as a new spouse, I think it can really help promote a positive relationship for everyone involved.

I also think it's really important to keep in mind that an ex in their relationship -- this is a really important one -- with the children and the family if there are kids involved, needs to be respected. A mistake that we see in our practice sometimes is parents talking negatively about the ex-partner or spouse in front of the kid. And this is really ultimately not helpful for anyone involved. It could be damaging to both the child's relationship with the ex-partner and potentially you as the new partner.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is tempting, though, to say those things, I'm sure. You're upset, you're having your reactions, and it's very hard to kind of keep that to yourself, I would imagine.

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah, absolutely. And I think one of the issues that people bring in regularly is that sometimes the kids will be the ones to bring up the kind of negative talk about the ex.

Lee Rosen: Sure. Yeah. They're going to be trashing every parent. Right.

Dr. Molly Parks: That's a question we often get. So the best advice in this situation I think is to always remain positive and respectful. You can validate a

child's feeling, saying something like, "So I'm sorry you feel that way about your dad," for instance, without joining in the negativity. And if you can't be positive, saying something neutral is fine, too. So this is respecting the parent-child relationship and teaching the child how to express their feelings without bashing other people or their parents.

Lee Rosen: Do you ever see families -- and I tell you, we've seen it come up some -- where the new spouse takes on the role of being the primary communicator about the kids with the former spouse. So let's say dad remarries; stepmom now is communicating with mom and dad is out of the picture. So it sounds like you've seen it. Is that a good thing, a bad thing? What do you think about that?

Dr. Molly Parks: Well, again I think it depends on the people and it depends on the relationship. I think we see that a lot more with women being the communicators because a lot of times in relationships we're used to that being the case.

Lee Rosen: Right. You're the communicators.

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah. So I think if we have a new spouse and an ex-spouse who are good communicators and feel like they can communicate without animosity and feel like the lines of communication are open, it can be a great thing.

You know, I think that when the jealousy and the anger come in, that communication can get disrupted and then we may have a problem. And I think the most important thing is that all of the adult parties involved be aware of their emotional reactions and make sure that they're always acting in the best interest of the children.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. I wish I was always aware of my emotional reactions. I am aware of them, right after I've done the bad thing that I should have thought about before I was doing it.

Let me ask you this. Obviously you're seeing new husbands and wives who have these former spouses in their lives. Are you ever seeing the whole -- all three of them? Do you ever have the three adults in your office trying to work out these issues?

Dr. Molly Parks: That does happen. We at Lepage do a lot of work with divorce and co-parenting after a divorce. So if families are willing to come in and kind of do that co-parenting work in a session where they can mediate through some of these communication styles and kind of work towards the best communication possible, we absolutely will

see people in bigger family groups, including both new spouses and ex-spouses.

Lee Rosen: Right. You have to drag an extra chair into your office, I guess, yeah.

Let me ask you. I've heard of couples where the new wife will basically say to the husband, "Look, this is all good, but you cannot be around your ex-wife. I don't want you alone or meeting in any way. Basically, if you need to communicate, do it by e-mail or phone. But you don't need to have any in-person." Which I guess is a manifestation of the jealousy and fear of what could happen. Do you think, a) is that a good idea, and b) how do you feel about that trust thing and rules and all of that? Does that work, or is that a bad idea?

Dr. Molly Parks: Well -- and I know I keep saying this -- it depends on the situation. I think -- putting ourselves in this situation -- if you notice that you are setting a lot of rules and boundaries that don't necessarily have a basis in reality and might have their basis in jealousy and anger.

I think that's a good time to seek outside consultation, whether it's a therapist, whether it's a trusted, objective friend. Because I think a lot of times, as you said, these kind of rigid rules can come from a place of jealousy, which is not where we want to be operating from in moving forward with co-parenting and with managing feelings between old spouses and new.

Lee Rosen: Right, right. You mentioned the spouse that just won't let go, and I can imagine that especially that comes up when you're seeing people that are upset and there are no kids, that they're still hanging on. Do those spouses -- my guess is like on some level their objective is to break up the new marriage.

Dr. Molly Parks: Mm-hmm.

Lee Rosen: Do they ever succeed? Are they ever such a pain and so difficult that they really do drive the new couple apart?

Dr. Molly Parks: Well, I think if that does happen there was obviously an emotional tie hanging on between the spouse and that ex that was not resolved. But I think yes, with an ex-spouse who continues to kind of harass a new relationship, setting up boundaries with that is probably a good idea because the intention is not a co-parenting one because there's no kids involved, but to disrupt this new relationship in some way.

I think it can be a very difficult thing to deal with and I think the new partners need to be open in their communication and in their

willingness to discuss this, to set boundaries that they're both comfortable with.

Lee Rosen: Right, right. Okay. So obviously in that case, there's an emotional tie that's not resolved. What should we expect? Those of us that have broken up with someone who was important to us, should we really get over it? You know, so let's say it's two years later, five years later, 10 years later; what does that mean, the emotional ties are resolved? What does that feel like? How do you know you're really done?

Dr. Molly Parks: I think that's a good question, Lee. It's definitely a complicated question.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's why you're the expert, right?

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah, absolutely. You know, I think when relationships end, especially if you are the person that has been broken up with, it can feel like you want a resolution. You want a reason for this happening. You want to kind of understand what you could have done differently. And for some people, you want to hold on to the fact that maybe there still is something that you could do differently.

I think it's a dangerous cycle to get into. And when a relationship breaks up and when there is that finality and when your ex-partner has moved on into a new relationship it's really important for us as the ex to work hard to focus not on those emotions of wondering what could I do, how could I get this relationship back, but really making sure that we're moving forward holistically in our lives.

So engaging in personal goals for ourselves, whether that be job, schooling, exercise, making sure that our lives are whole and that we're focusing on ourselves and not focusing on getting this relationship back. Because I think that people can get into a very vicious cycle that is really all-encompassing, emotionally encompassing and stalls our lives in a lot of ways.

Lee Rosen: You know, there's that old Elie Weisel -- probably not that old -- but that quote, and I'm butchering it, I'm sure -- the opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference.

If you find yourself still hating your ex-spouse, what does that tell you about where you are in that process of kind of getting on with things?

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah. I think that's a perfect quote in that if hate is there it probably means love is still there; that moving on means you're going to be

noticing more indifference, you're going to be noticing not thinking about them as much. You're going to be thinking about engaging another relationship. Hate is very active. It causes you to still have a connection with that person. So I think if people can't feel that love anymore, hate is a connector.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It makes me think if I'm dating someone and I'm hearing a lot of kind of hate comments about that ex-spouse, that's probably a big red flag that we're going to have trouble if we end up getting married, because this person is not over it yet.

Dr. Molly Parks: Exactly. There may still be those emotional ties there.

Lee Rosen: Well, speaking of people not getting over it, don't you sometimes have people where it doesn't matter what you do -- I mean, you bring them into the office, you work with them and everything and give the best psychological treatment that you can give them, but they just can't get along with the ex-spouse and the new spouse can't get along with the ex-spouse. I mean, it's just a disaster. What do you do at that point?

Dr. Molly Parks: Yeah. You know, I think unfortunately there's situations where ex-spouses and new spouses or new partners just can't get along. And in these situations I focus more on the kid piece of this because the kids are the ones who are affected.

I think the most important tenet to remember is that you do not want to engage in open conflict in front of kids because this is associated with the poorest outcome for the kids. So really, in a situation with or without kids you want toward generating an event where you and the ex-spouse can avoid each other or ignore each other at events where you have to be in contact. And this is probably the best solution, and it's not ideal, but again, better when kids are involved than experiencing hostility between the important adults in their lives.

And if you're having trouble staying out of conflict with an ex-spouse, this is actually a great thing to bring to a trained divorce or parenting psychologist, who can work with you in parent coordination and mediation.

Lee Rosen: Right, right. Yeah, you've got to get help at that point. If you can't handle it on your own, this is too important to just kind of let drift by. You've got to deal with it.

Dr. Molly Parks: Yep. And having the emotional maturity to notice that that's happening, and that it's time to seek help.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, Molly, terrific words of wisdom and insight into how to deal with an ex-spouse. I really appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much.

Dr. Molly Parks: Thank you. I enjoyed it, too.

Lee Rosen: You can learn a lot more about Molly and read her bio at the Lepage Associates website. It's LepageAssociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And you can also reach her at her office. Molly's office number is (919) 572-0000. That's in Durham, North Carolina.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We'd love to hear your comments, your feedback. We answer all the feedback that we get.

You can reach us in a couple of ways. One is to call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083. Or you can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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