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Does Absence Really Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

This is Stay Happily Married #127, "Does Absence Really Make the Heart Grow Fonder?"

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. If you or your spouse has to do a lot of traveling for work, you know what a strain it can put on both the marriage and the whole family.

Archana Aragon is here with us today to talk about the problem and to share some ways of easing the tension a partner's frequent absence can cause. She's a licensed clinical social worker with a private practice covering Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She has 15 years of experience, during which she has helped a lot of couples who have had this exact problem.

Welcome to the show. I'm glad you could join us today, Archana.

Archana Aragon: Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: You know, this is a -- this absence really -- I hope it makes the heart grow fonder because my experience is this is more and more common, that lots of people with the current economy are having to travel to other cities and leave the rest of the family behind because of work issues. Is that what you're finding?

Archana Aragon: You're right. It's absolutely getting more and more common. Especially with the tough economy, one spouse or the other is

taking assignments and jobs that involve more travel and then leaving the trailing spouse and/or family behind. So you're right; I am seeing it more frequently than I have in the past as well.

Lee Rosen: It's interesting, but I think the reality is that it's got to be tough to even come and see you with the travel schedule that a lot of these folks are leading. Are you having to adjust the hours of your practice to get people in on weekends?

Archana Aragon: Yes. That's a really good point. I'm not able to see families in the traditional business hours. So what I do is I actually see a lot of couples on Saturdays. So instead of -- so I've adjusted the way I work. People are traveling. They don't get in until Friday night. Sometimes they're sent away on a moment's notice. So I have adjusted the way I practice.

I do see couples on Saturdays and that seems to be a very popular day, actually.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, it makes sense. It may be the only time that they have all week. What are you seeing -- when you're visiting with couples and they're coming to see you that are in these kind of arrangements with lots of the travel and lots of distance, what kind of problems are you seeing developing in those couples?

Archana Aragon: Very frequently one or both spouses end up feeling very disconnected and very lonely. And both of them, actually; I can't just say one feels lonely and the other doesn't. What I see is that both feel disconnected, both feel lonely, both feel like there's something missing, both are dissatisfied eventually with their relationship. I don't know if they would name it that; that's what I do is I name it for them. I say, "Well, it sounds like you both are lonely. It sounds like you both are feeling really disconnected from each other." And then they'll nod in agreement.

Lee Rosen: Well, and I guess marriage is hard enough when you don't have these extra issues going on in your life. I would guess that when a couple has got all this distance and travel going on that the normal issues, they become even worse. Am I --

Archana Aragon: Yeah. You're right. What happens is they don't get to address it in a timely fashion. What'll happen is couples will either ignore it and hope it goes away or hope that when the partner comes back that they won't feel so angry at this person. And maybe on minor issues that might work, but on major issues that absolutely doesn't work. Ignoring it doesn't work.

The other thing that I've seen how couples address is they will argue over things that have really nothing to do with the core issue. So an argument will ensue about some other problem, so that they're engaging; they're communicating; they are arguing. So they're engaging in a manner, so to speak, but it's not really effective because it doesn't get resolved. And next thing you know, the spouse is off and again traveling. And so the matter just builds and builds. The resentment builds and builds.

So those two ways absolutely don't work. Ignoring it doesn't really work and neither does arguing over things that are unrelated to the core issue.

Lee Rosen: I think a lot of spouses who are dealing with the other spouse traveling get very anxious about the distance and the fact that there's no one there watching. And they worry that -- what is it they say? "When the cat's away, the mice will play." That somebody will be having -- that an affair is more likely because you're in a hotel, maybe you go down to the bar in the lobby, there are other people that -- you know what I'm saying. Do you think --

Archana Aragon: Infidelity, yeah.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. In your experience, does that happen? Is that an inevitable part of this sort of traveling for business kind of thing?

Archana Aragon: The couples that come to see me are not reporting infidelity. That is not the main thing they're reporting. The main thing that they're coming in with is, "We are not able to talk about our problems because one of us is always away. And we don't feel connected to each other. We don't have intimacy." That's what they're saying. I'm not hearing them say that, "My partner had an affair when they were out of town."

Lee Rosen: Right. That's interesting. And it kind of surprises me, but I guess it makes sense. These are folks that really are trying to work on things. And if they were off being involved with other people maybe they wouldn't be trying so hard to make their marriage work.

So what do you do with them? You have these folks coming to see you and there is this kind of travel and this kind of distance between them. What are the things that you can do to help? How do you get them back on track?

Archana Aragon: So one thing that I do is I really have them talk about how can they create a system of connecting on a regular basis? So how can they maintain contact while one is away? So that is -- with high-tech

actually it's so much easier now than it used to be. There's Skype. So I recommend that they use any type of high-tech that's available to them to stay connected. So Skyping is one way, video camera, videoconferencing, and have a set time that they talk to each other, that they check in with each other.

So for an example -- and also one thing. You talked about infidelity. Some of these people that are traveling absolutely have no time for this. They are working so hard; I don't know when they would have time for it. So I feel for both partners because the one that's at the hotel is also working because they're lonely and they don't have really any friends in that town. They're probably contract workers or they're just there for a week. So they don't have connections in that town so they're lonely too. They're sitting in their hotel room and they're just working.

That's what I hear, that "I'm sitting in my hotel room. I'm working, working, working. I'm not meeting anyone. I'm not having fun either." The fantasy is that the partner that's at home is working and the one at the hotel is having a good time. That's not the case. That's not what I'm hearing.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Archana Aragon: So I suggest that they have some type of daily contact. Especially if there's children involved that's a very, very big thing.

The other thing that I suggest is they have --

Lee Rosen: Let me slow you down just a minute here.

Archana Aragon: Okay.

Lee Rosen: I want to go back to the -- you mentioned Skype and I think that that's worth exploring for a second. And it may be that everybody that knows how to listen to a podcast already knows everything about Skype; I don't know. But I use it a lot and I use the videoconferencing piece of it. And when I am traveling, I do use it to talk to my wife. And I'm sure your experience is the same. To have that video component of the conversation, it takes what was a phone call and turns it into something that is much more like being there in person.

Archana Aragon: Right. And I mean, nothing replaces the flesh-and-blood person there before you, but with the Skype and the videoconferencing you can see the person, you can make eye contact, you can see them smile, you can see them laugh at your joke, you can see them

concentrating on you. Where with phone, someone can be multi-tasking, you'd never know it; or appear distracted, you wouldn't know. But with the Skyping, you can see them and I think that's the next best thing to having them there. They can't be there with you but at least you're seeing them.

Lee Rosen: And it's free. And the Skype-to-Skype calls are free with the video, so you can't beat that.

Archana Aragon: Correct.

Lee Rosen: And not every laptop has a webcam, but a lot of them have that built right in. So that's fascinating that you see that as a tool for helping marriages, but it really makes a lot of sense and I cannot -- I mean, my personal experience is that it really does enhance your communication just tenfold over a regular, ordinary phone call.

Now, you were talking about sort of setting a regular time or regular plan for daily communication. What do you advise people to do about that?

Archana Aragon: Especially where kids are involved you might have that be a part of your nighttime ritual. So for an example, let's say it's 8:30 p.m. or something like that. You might have your partner agree to call at that time and connect with the kids and review the day as if they were there. Depending on how much time you both have, you could make that a part of sort of the bedtime ritual.

Lee Rosen: Right. I do think that some couples don't plan on talking every day while one of the partners is on a trip. But you're saying really you ought to talk every single day. There's no reason not to, I suppose.

Archana Aragon: I would talk every single day. I wouldn't let a day go by that you're not checking in with your partner. And even if you're in town you ought to do that. You ought to -- once you're settled in after dinner that you sit down and give yourselves whatever -- even if it's a minimal amount of time, even if it's 5 or 10 minutes that you sit down and check in with each other. I think that is absolutely crucial to bring closure to the day and just to check in and say, "Hey, how was your day? How are you doing? Are you okay? Anything on your mind that you couldn't talk about with the kids around?"

Lee Rosen: Right. That's great advice but we can only do that during the summer when there are reruns on, because otherwise we have a new show. Got to get our priorities straight.

Archana Aragon: So true.

Lee Rosen: So what about -- you've mentioned -- okay. So daily communication. You're a big fan of using Skype and keeping in touch in that way. That's terrific. What other advice do you give to folks when there's this much travel going on in their lives?

Archana Aragon: So I suggest a reconnection plan. So when the partner returns from their travel, that you have a way of reconnecting that's meaningful. And that doesn't mean -- it doesn't have to be really fancy, but something that'd be meaningful to the two of you as a couple and something that would be meaningful if there's children involved to do as a family.

So for an example, say like there's a buildup of, "Oh, so-and-so's gone. Mom or Dad is gone. But we have this plan to do this this weekend together."

Lee Rosen: Right. So just kind of having something on the agenda and having what you call a reconnection plan so you can sort of get back on track.

Archana Aragon: I call it a reconnection plan. Correct.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Archana Aragon: That you plan for it. That so-and-so's leaving and you'll say, "Okay, I have to leave but here's what we're going to do. When I get back, we're going to go to Frankie's Fun Park with everybody." Or if it's just a couple, "I'll pick you up at the airport and let's go to dinner at this-and-this place," or "Let's go catch this movie." And so you really look forward to it. It's like the anticipation can be quite pleasurable.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. Now, I've heard advice about -- especially with kids, I guess -- about objects and attachment and all that. Is that something you talk to folks about?

Archana Aragon: Absolutely. When there's kids involved, even a couple of days of absence feels like -- for children time is very long. And so even an absence of a couple of days can feel like eternity. And so especially with small children I call it an object of attachment, that the partner that's leaving, the parent that's leaving, that they leave the child with an object of themselves that the child can have with them.

So in some cases I suggest like a picture that the child can have under their pillow or by their bed stand, or it could be a teddy bear

or some type of small token as a way of remembering that parent or attaching to that parent.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Archana Aragon: And then the child in return would give the parent an object to take with them. So for children that aren't writing or anything like that, they could draw a picture for the parent and stick it in their luggage so the child knows, "Oh, Mom or Dad has this picture that I drew." They could refer to it in these conversations that they're going to have every night. A toy or something like that. For older kids, maybe a letter that they wrote to their parent. It just has to be symbolic and meaningful to that relationship. Does that make sense?

Lee Rosen: It does make a lot of sense. And I have a 13-year-old who carries a stuffed animal with her that I gave her. So when she's on trips, she takes it with her and I'm sure --

Archana Aragon: That's good.

Lee Rosen: -- it serves the same purpose when I'm away. Yeah. Very interesting. It was funny because it was some little inexpensive thing I bought at Target, but for her it really has taken on emotional value -- sentimental value, I guess. And it's fascinating to watch. But it's exactly what you're talking about.

Archana Aragon: Yeah. It's the meaning behind it. It's the symbol behind it. And I also -- we talked about traveling spouses but I also work quite a bit with military families. This is always going on in their lives. So these transitions of parents coming and going, and it's so important that they have something meaningful that they can hang onto while the parent is away.

But even if there's no children involved, couples should think about this. How can they attach to each other? What can they hang onto from their partner while that partner's away? Kind of a way of feeling secure about the relationship while this partner's away.

Lee Rosen: You know, the old saying really is "absence makes the heart grow fonder." But it does not sound like that's in fact the case. I mean, does it ever work out that being gone and not really talking very much does bring people closer together? Or is it sort of inevitable that the distance and time apart are going to make the relationship tougher?

Archana Aragon: Absence can make the heart grow fonder if it's a secure attachment. Because it's the security in the relationship to begin with. So a strong, healthy relationship can withstand more separation and less contact than a relationship that had difficulty to begin with. So what it is, is that the travel is symptomatic of maybe things that are already problematic in the relationship. The relationship already had problems, and then on top of that someone's traveling. And so it just adds another layer of difficulty.

So I think relationships that are pretty good and healthy and strong to begin would stand these separations from each other much better than those relationships that already were full of problems and then the partner started traveling.

Lee Rosen: Right. So absence does make the heart grow fonder, but only if you were --

Archana Aragon: In a secure relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. You had to be in really good shape to start with and then you can go on a trip and things will be even better. But if you're like most of us --

Archana Aragon: Well, no, the things don't have to be so bad.

Lee Rosen: Right. But I don't -- I mean, I think for most people things are tough and marriage is a challenge, especially when there are kids. And gosh, you do need to work at it. And so I guess absence doesn't -- at least not anymore -- it doesn't for most of us make the heart grow fonder.

We've covered a lot of ground today and you've given a lot of practical advice and good ideas. Anything else we ought to know about dealing with all of this distance and travel in our lives?

Archana Aragon: Yeah. I would say that geographical distance is not as insurmountable as emotional distance. So what I want to leave couples feeling is hopeful that these things can be worked through, they can be resolved. It's a matter of simply coming up with a plan, a strategy.

It can be done informally, meaning two people can sit down together and say, "Look, this is really hard on our relationship. We're both lonely. We're both not happy with this. But what can we do to make this work in the meantime?" That's one way. Certainly coming to a therapist like myself, a marriage counselor, can also help couples come up with strategies that will work so that they can

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have a bond and security in their relationship when one spouse has to travel.

Lee Rosen: Terrific.

Archana Aragon: And my message is that there's ways out of this. There's ways. It doesn't have to be so difficult.

Lee Rosen: Terrific advice. Archana, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today. Thank you very much for being here.

Archana Aragon: My pleasure.

Lee Rosen: If you'd like to learn more about Archana's practice in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, you can get up with her by telephone is probably the easiest way. Her phone number is (919) 608-4821.

Thank you so much for joining us today and for listening in. We will be back again next week. In the meantime, if you have comments, feedback, suggestions, we'd love to hear from you. Couple of ways you can reach us. You can get us on our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the Web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.