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10th Anniversary: Reflections of a Marriage Counselor

This is Stay Happily Married #134, "10th Anniversary: Reflections of a Marriage Counselor."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here with a friend of the show, Dr. Tina Lepage. Tina is the founder of Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she specializes in personal and professional relationship issues, children and adolescents, and family counseling.

And boy, Tina has been on this show a bunch of times. So if you're a regular listener, you probably feel like you already know Tina.

She's a licensed psychologist with a masters and a doctorate in clinical psychology. She's developed and managed successful personal and professional growth programs for universities, for corporations, even for the U.S. military. And to top it all off, she's been married for 10 years. Now, that's what we're going to talk about today.

She's now looking at her 10th anniversary. We're going to talk about her marriage. We're going to get behind the scenes in the marriage of a marriage counselor and we're going to find out what she's learned not only as a professional during that 10 years but, most importantly, what she's learned being a spouse in a marriage that has survived 10 years.

Tina, welcome back to the program.

Tina Lepage: Hi, Lee. Thanks for having me back.

Lee Rosen: Congratulations on your 10th anniversary. What's the actual date of the anniversary?

Tina Lepage: Thank you. The actual date was October 7th.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So here's what I want to know. You spend all day watching people go through this, helping them go through this, trying to make things work in their marriages. Does it translate? Are you able to use what you know at home?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Absolutely. That's probably been one of the wonderful benefits of being a marriage therapist. So it has translated. It doesn't translate perfectly. I mean, I'm still human and so I'm still -- there are times that I'm going to be upset about something and I'm going to miss my queue for, oh, okay, this is where I should do this or communicate this way, etc. But I would say the overall answer to that is yes, it really helps.

There are a couple of things that I've learned as a marriage counselor that help me a great deal in my marriage.

Lee Rosen: Well, I have to jump right to that. What are the couple of things that you think of that are most important that you've learned?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. That are most relevant. One has been really the broad area of communication. And you hear that all the time; it can sound a little bit like just a catch phrase. But it's just so real and so poignant and true, that if you know how to communicate effectively and fairly, if you know how to sort of talk about your thoughts and feelings and negotiate and compromise, versus what I think a lot more of us do almost more naturally is to be defensive or take a position.

So if you really know how to communicate effectively and fight fairly and resolve issues -- because usually if you communicate well, issues get resolved -- that's a huge area. And my mind stays in that so often because day to day I'm talking to other people about it, so it's always present in my mind. And then of course I've coached my husband on this as well.

And then I would say the other area is really sort of perspective taking and empathy. When I'm the marriage counselor, I'm a neutral. I'm not on his side; I'm not on her side. And that has really helped a lot because I think there are a lot of us that get sort of

either gender-specific thinking or we just get into our own way of thinking based on how we were raised, etc. And so being able to take the other person's perspective and really empathize with that perspective has made a huge difference.

Lee Rosen: Do you think you did a better job of picking your partner because of your education? Did you know what to look for?

Tina Lepage: I picked him when I was really young, Lee, so I had to change him along the way, and change myself along the way too as we both sort of grew up and -- so I don't think that -- no, I don't think I did a better job of picking him, because I was very young when I picked him.

Lee Rosen: Right. Does he ever just look at you and say, "You're doing that counseling thing to me?"

Tina Lepage: You know, he doesn't too much, no. I think when we're in the middle of something -- our own discussion, argument, whatever -- it's very real. And no, I actually get that more from friends who will say -- if they're complaining about their spouse, I tend to not take a side in the conversation and my girlfriends will say, "Just say he's a jerk. Just take a side with me."

Lee Rosen: Right. That's what they all want. Fascinating.

Now, he's not a touchy-feely mental health guy, right? I mean, he's just a normal guy, right?

Tina Lepage: Normal guy. Well, even worse, right; he's an engineer by training.

Lee Rosen: That is worse. Yeah.

Tina Lepage: He's not touchy-feely. In fact, I went home and told him once that at a staff meeting here at the office, the women here -- psychologists -- had decided that -- we had said he's not psychologically-minded. And when we said that in the office, we were joking that maybe engineers are not always psychologically-minded, although that's a stereotype. But I laughed because I said, "He's going to consider that a compliment."

And I went home and told him that and he said, "Of course I'm not psychologically-minded. Who wants to be that? That just sounds taxing and it would suck a lot of energy."

Lee Rosen: That's fascinating. Yeah. The engineering perspective. But I think that's shared by a lot of people. I mean, that's just a different way of looking at the world. Very interesting.

Tina Lepage: Right.

Lee Rosen: So what is the biggest screw-up? You've been married 10 years. Where did you really drop the ball in the past 10 years? How'd you blow it?

Tina Lepage: Oh, boy. That's a great question. I have to think about that for one second. How did I blow it in the last several years?

Lee Rosen: Yeah. What's good enough to tell the story but not so good that this thing will go viral on the Internet.

Tina Lepage: Let's see. Gosh --

Lee Rosen: I know if I had reversed that question you'd have a list, right, of what he's done.

Tina Lepage: Right. How did he blow it? It's a hard question because I think we do fairly good at our marriage. So it's not that one big thing stands out, but there have been four or five big arguments, which is unusual for us to get to the point of it being a huge argument. But there have been some points around that.

I will say after the birth of our daughter we were just another statistic, meaning that the statistics all show that after the birth of your child the marriage actually usually goes downhill a little bit in terms of happiness and content, etc., for a variety of reasons, just the stress of that. And so that was a really difficult time for us. And we were probably neither of us particularly as nice to each other sometimes as we were before the birth of our child. So just more short-tempered.

I mean, I guess I would say in fairness, now that I'm talking about it, probably since the birth of my daughter I am more short-tempered than I was before the birth of her. With him, not with her.

Lee Rosen: Just more stress in the household, I guess.

Tina Lepage: It's another full-time job that you're both managing. And so as much as you love and adore your child, it's still who's going to do this and who's going to do that and who's taking care of this and who's taking care of that? And, yeah, just a typical stressor.

Lee Rosen: Have there ever been periods in the 10 years where you thought that it might not work, that you might not make it?

Tina Lepage: You know, there haven't been any times yet that I thought we wouldn't make it. Part of that is probably because I think that we both don't talk about marriage and divorce in that way. We kind of have this sense that we can be happily married or we can be unhappily married; those are our choices because we've decided to be married.

Now, I'm not naïve and I don't -- I mean, I work with people who get divorced, so clearly one of us could change that some day. So I wasn't so much thinking we might not make it, but after my daughter was born -- probably when she was about a year to a year-and-a-half -- I had a feeling of, "Wow, I can actually perceive now what it would be like to be unhappily married. Because if he doesn't start doing more of the child care, I'm going to be unhappily married."

Lee Rosen: Right. So how did that work out? Did you guys work it out, talk about it? How did that go?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. I told him that and, you know, it's interesting because it's not like I hadn't been talking in that whole year about things I would like different, but he heard it in a different way because I said it in a different way.

I said what I just said to you, "Wow, I could actually picture being unhappily married. And I never thought I could imagine that before." And that got his attention. That got him to turn the TV off and look and talk. And then we sort of talked about it and he just started doing a little bit more after that.

It wasn't that he hadn't already been doing a lot; it's just that life is busy. He has a very demanding job. And so we just worked it out.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you were being a counselor before you had this experience of 10 years of marriage. And I'm wondering, how -- when you look back on what you used to say to people and now you look at what you say to people, how has that 10 years of marriage impacted the advice you give and the things that you're able to communicate to your patients?

Tina Lepage: One of the things I think is different -- part of what's different is simply that I can talk about it with more confidence because I have more insight. And that's very similar with parenting too.

So sort of the good news is the stuff that counselors and therapists are trained in really works. So the communication stuff I've been trained in and the stuff about working with couples and how you can help them to work out their problems. Same thing with parenting; the stuff you see about different things to do with kids so that they'll kind of move along in the direction you want them to, all that stuff works.

But before you have lots of marriage under your belt, or before you have your own child under your belt, it's a little bit theoretical. You're saying it. You believe it's true. So part of what's different is I can just really -- I know exactly what I'm talking about. Been there, seen it, done that. Certainly empathize with the people because I know what they're each feeling and just get confident in what I'm talking to them about in terms of its effectiveness.

Lee Rosen: Makes a lot of sense. We've talked a little bit about your child and how she has impacted life at home. What about in-laws? Some folks feel like in-laws kind of drop bombs on their marriages.

Tina Lepage: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Let's start with his parents. How has that gone?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Well, we don't have lots of in-law problems. So I don't know that we're going to be a typical example. Part of that, I guess, is our attitude toward in-laws. I really like my in-laws very much.

His mom, when our daughter was born she lived with us for about six or seven months. I got a lot of feedback from friends that said, "Oh, that sounds awful and that sounds so long." And I thought it was wonderful. I mean, I thought it was absolutely terrific. I had live-in childcare, somebody who adored the child as well and was helping with her.

So whatever small things they do differently than us or -- I mean, certainly my mother-in-law did things differently with my child than I would have done. But I didn't get into that whole competition of "well, it's my child and you have to do things my way." I sort of just respected her as another adult woman who raised her kids perfectly well, so I just let her do things her way.

So I don't have issues with them at all. I enjoy them and I enjoy when they visit and I enjoy when we visit them.

Lee Rosen: Sounds like a perfect life.

Tina Lepage: It's not. I mean, I will say there's a lot of stuff where -- his mom can want to really insert her opinion sometimes. But like my own parents, I always listen to that. And I sort of have a phrase where I listen to them and I say, "I want to hear what you think because you've been there, done that and I respect your opinion." And then we're going to take that into account and do what we think.

And so sometimes it's not always the same. So it's not always like it's easier, like there aren't discussions or arguments about what they would like us to do different or something, but it's pretty minimal.

Lee Rosen: Now, if we had your husband on the line what would he say about his interactions with his in-laws?

Tina Lepage: He doesn't have a lot of interaction with them. So that really makes a difference. We don't have as much interaction probably in terms of -- until recently, neither of my parents was retired. Now my father's retired. So we don't -- they don't come and stay for months on end. Like his parents are both retired, so they come and -- his mom comes and stays for longer periods of time. So it's just been sort of the visit -- my parents are in Maine.

Neither of our parents are local, either. My parents are in Maine and his parents are in Greece because he's Greek-American. So there's not a lot of interaction.

Lee Rosen: Minimizes the chaos when they live on the other side of the --

Tina Lepage: Yeah, it does.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That's a good thing. Yeah. I'm wondering if my in-laws would move to Greece. Maybe we can work something out.

Tina Lepage: It might be good. It's a great place to visit. I mean, how can I not like going to visit my in-laws, right?

Lee Rosen: Right. Exactly. So now you've made it 10 years. Now, most of us -- I think we kind of make it 10 years, we go out to dinner, we buy flowers or whatever, and then we undertake the next 10 years. Do you have any sort of master plan for how the next 10 years are going to be different than the first 10 years?

Tina Lepage: That's a funny question because I'm picturing like we were saying about my husband, how he -- it would be funny to sit down with him and say, "Let's talk about the next 10 years." He would do it, but he doesn't necessarily feel a need for what you're describing as a

sort of master plan. He kind of feels like if we love each other and we're getting along, why do we have to have a discussion like that? Although he would have a practical discussion like that in terms of where do we see ourselves living, going?

We certainly talk about goals and dreams for the future in terms of where we might live, what we might do when our daughter graduates from high school, whether that would be different than what we're doing now, if we would want to move anywhere different, retirement planning. We talk about stuff like that. But we don't -- yeah.

Lee Rosen: Let's say -- you know, you've been married 10 years, so you've got a lot of history there. I think people put a lot of value on that collective history of the relationship. If he did something that was -- let's say he commits adultery tomorrow, which we hope he doesn't, but how would you evaluate that now after 10 years? Would you be able to work it out, stick together? Or would that be a disaster? It'd probably be a disaster either way but --

Tina Lepage: It's a tough question because of course it's theoretical until it happens and then you have all the emotional impact that comes into it. So I always joke with him, if he commits adultery I just want him to tell me so then I know we have an open marriage and we can both go do whatever we want. So it shouldn't be a secret.

But the reality is, of course there would be hugely hurt feelings and I think I'd probably have the same approach to it in my head that many women do, not surprisingly. Is that I think often times women want to know was it just about the sex or is there an emotional connection/relationship there? And then if it's just a one-night stand on the road -- and I don't mean "just a" like that's not important -- but if it feels like that versus it feels like a relationship that is threatening the marriage, then I think it's different.

I think as somebody who has seen a lot of people come in for therapy and deal with infidelity and move on in the marriage, that that would probably be my first approach would be I don't know that I would see that as something that would necessarily ruin the marriage. Kind of like what you're talking about, we have this huge history. So would I leave all that for that type of mistake, even though it's a big mistake? I don't know that I would right off the bat. I think I would try to work it out.

Lee Rosen: Got you. Well, yeah. It's a tough call. I think it's a tough call for anybody. Very tough situation.

So let me ask you --

Tina Lepage: I think there are things that would be worse, actually. I think if somebody developed a gambling habit where all of a sudden all your money's gone -- like, frankly, in some ways there are some practical things that are harder to recover from as a family than that might be.

Lee Rosen: Right. Hadn't thought of it that way. And I think a lot of people see that as the ultimate betrayal, but you're right. I mean, the reality is losing all the money would be much harder to recover from.

So 10 years of history and 10 years of sort of learning about one another. What have you learned? What's going to make it better for the next 10 years? Why is having made it through the first 10 years a plus? What are you expecting out of the next? Do you see improvements coming?

Tina Lepage: I think so. I mean, I think one of the things that I've seen is that over the years we both get more mature and more -- as life gets more stable, I think with maturity you're more emotionally stable, you're more financially stable. There are just a lot of things that sort of get comfortable in a good way. So I think that that's very helpful.

I think that -- he and I both talk about sometimes how important it is to be flexible. And I think that both of us are fairly flexible, although sometimes you have that first shockwave of, oh, this isn't going to go the way we thought it was.

And I guess when I'm talking about flexibility, that idea if you're going to spend a lifetime with somebody, they may change along the way. They may start to value different things or have different interests. And that ability to sort of go with the flow, encourage that in them so that they feel lifted up and not be -- just be able to change with that. And, "Oh, I thought we were going to do X, Y, and Z and now you have no interest in that anymore. What are we going to do with that?"

Lee Rosen: What's going to happen now from a romance standpoint? You guys going to -- is there going to be any romance or is it just going to be another year.

Tina Lepage: No, that's it; the romance is gone. I mean, can we even pretend that. I don't know. No.

But you know what I think happens over the years is that -- almost like it comes in waves. So I think early on there's -- of course there's

a lot of romance early on in a relationship and then it sort of changes over time. And we might go through spurts where one or both of us is more romantic than usual and then you get back into the daily grind and that might not be there as much.

So I will say that my husband -- luckily for me, he's romantic sort of in what he says. So he's not going to remember or think to bring flowers or to plan a surprise vacation or some of the things that I would really like. He's really never going to do those things; I need to just let that go. But he is regularly, "I love you," "It's fate that we're together," "I'm lucky to have you," stuff like that.

Lee Rosen: Boy, he's making the rest of us look bad. Yeah.

Tina Lepage: And that's so easy, right? Everybody out there, men and women, should just do that stuff. Like, those kind words, just nice little things to say to each other. That's so easy to do in the relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, I can -- you're 10 years in. Got another, I don't know, 30 or 40 to go, based on life expectancies. But what about now? The magic of the whole sex thing has I'm sure -- is different now, 10 years in, than it was early on in the relationship. How are you going to keep that --

Tina Lepage: Right. There are not many surprises left at this point.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. Been there, done that. Right. How do you keep that spark alive at this point in the marriage?

Tina Lepage: You know, I think it's very similar to the romance in that, again, I think it sort of comes in waves. And I think people who have been married for 10 years will say there are times that you're having sex that it's fairly routine. But that doesn't mean that it's not still enjoyable; it's just fairly routine.

And then there are other times that one of you will decide that you're going to spice things up or try to just -- yeah, basically try to spice things up. And so then you do that. And it might be around vacations when you have time away from the kids or time to yourself, or it might just be that somebody decides that, okay, let's make this a little fun and different and interesting.

So I think that everybody who's married sort of has that sense over the years that you get into this comfort zone. But I think that comfort doesn't have to be boring.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes a lot of sense.

Tina Lepage: So sex is still fun.

Lee Rosen: It still works. Right.

Tina Lepage: Still a great activity.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. I'm good with that. Now, let me ask you one last question. Looking back on the 10 years, if you're looking at -- you're talking with a couple that is just getting started, they're very early on in this, maybe they're about to get married; you've got your 10 years of living it and you've got all your years of professional experience and education. What's the most important piece of advice you would pass along to that couple that's just at the beginning of all of this?

Tina Lepage: I think that the advice that I would give people who are just starting out, one I would say is have reasonable expectations. Don't expect your spouse to be everything in the world to you. I don't even necessarily think people should think about marriage as, oh, my spouse is going to make me happy. I like more personal responsibility in my life because that gives me more control.

So I like to think of my life as I'm primarily responsible for making myself happy. And it's great if my spouse is additive to that and I certainly want my spouse to be a part of that, but really just not having huge, unrealistic expectations. Coming at your marriage from a personal responsibility perspective of how can I make this a great marriage? What can I do?

And then the stuff I talked about, like really learning how to be a good communicator, learning how to resolve issues, making sure that you are trying to be flexible with your spouse, those types of things. I mean, those things just have huge benefit. And they don't necessarily take a lot of time.

I mean, couples who are early in their relationship, I think it's wonderful for people to go into marriage counseling or read a couple of books about the topic. Sometimes men or women -- either -- might feel like it's quicker and easier just to go to two or three sessions than it is to read bunches of books and wonder if they're reading the right stuff.

But basically learn those skills. I mean, you can do either premarital counseling -- or really you can do it any time in your marriage -- where two to four sessions with somebody who can talk about, okay, how do you guys argue and what are the things you guys get

stuck on with each other? Or what are the things that frustrate you about one another? And just work that stuff through so that you have those skills. I mean, it's amazing to me sometimes that people don't take just a few hours to build their skills that will make their marriage happy.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic advice. Tina, thank you so much for talking with us and for giving us not just your professional advice and insight but for allowing us a little bit of insight into your personal life. I appreciate it.

Tina Lepage: Sure.

Lee Rosen: Congratulations, again, by the way, on the 10 years. That's a terrific achievement.

Those of you that are listening, let me tell you, you should definitely check out Tina's website. It's LepageAssociates.com. Lots of great information about Tina and her staff, the services they offer, articles, links to resources; you name it, it's there. You can also get in touch by calling her office at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We will be back, as usual, same time, same place.

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.