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Project Happily Ever After

This is Stay Happily Married 137, "Project Happily Ever After."

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. You know, we know very few people that are able to hold onto those real fairy tale marriages. But it's not often that people really open up about how bad things can get. Maybe you hate the thought of physical contact with your spouse. Maybe you've even fantasized about what things would be like if they died.

Well, Alisa Bowman's upcoming book, *Project Happily Ever After: Saving Your Marriage When the Fairy Tale Falters*, tells her own experience. And in contrast to that fairy tale imagery in the title, she isn't afraid to delve into the most personal parts of her marriage.

Alisa's been a guest with us before. And in addition to her book, she also keeps up a blog at ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. And she's been featured, gosh, just everywhere you turn -- USA Today, Red Book, I mean, all the national TV. She is a rock star in this arena of talking about marriage.

Alisa, welcome back to the show.

Alisa Bowman: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee Rosen: You know, I'm excited about your book. I've really been waiting for this to happen. And I know it's going to be in the stores, what is it, December 28th. And we'll be able to -- we can order it now on Amazon, right?

Alisa Bowman: Yes, you can order it now. And maybe it'll be in some stores earlier. It's funny how the publishing process works. Like, the book basically hits a warehouse -- I think it hit the warehouse yesterday. And then it goes out on these trucks, and the trucks have to bring it all over the country to different places. So these actual pub dates are -- they're just sort of these random days, but it could arrive at a book store anywhere from tomorrow to December 28th.

Lee Rosen: Well, cool.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: I'll be looking for it. Now, you were just a -- most of the people on this show are marriage experts. They're people that have spent their whole lives learning about helping people with their marriage and you were just a regular person that started to get interested in this. What happened in your life that sort of shifted your focus and got you thinking about your marriage and marriage in general?

Alisa Bowman: Oh, sure. What happened is that my marriage fell apart. You know, my husband and I probably had a lot of problems that we were unaware of because our marriage was not under stress. And you can have numerous communication issues and other issues and not have them become a really big deal until you face a stressor. And ours was that he opened a business.

He had a start-up business, which meant that he was working 12- to 14-hour days, seven days a week. He was basically never home. He also had no income because it was a start-up. Actually, his income was in the negative digits for about a year or two. And we decided -- well, I mean, I was already pregnant when he started the business, so we had a baby on the way.

By the time the baby came, I was basically a single mother. I was the person in charge of earning all the money. I was doing all the parenting. I didn't have support in the area; my parents were far away, his parents were far away. And I ended up with a lot of postpartum issues. The baby had some issues as well. And our marriage just sort of fell apart from lack of communication and stress.

And so we came so close to getting a divorce. And I have to say, if it wasn't for a very close friend of mine who had already been through a divorce, my husband and I might not be together today. But I had dinner with her one night and I told her all about my problems and I really thought that she was going to give me permission. I just

complained about my marriage for a good half hour, 45 minutes, went on and on and on. And I was expecting her to tell me that my husband was a sorry excuse for a husband, I deserved better and I should just get out. And that's not what she said at all.

She was like, you know, have you tried marital counseling? Have you tried doing anything? And I really hadn't tried anything structured. We tried fighting. I tried crying. I tried saying I'm miserable. But I hadn't tried anything formal to save my marriage. And so she made me promise to try to do something.

And I left that conversation feeling like, okay, I've done other projects in my life. I've learned how to get my baby to sleep at night. I've learned how to train my dog. I've learned how to do these other things by reading books.

I came from the self-help industry. I'm a ghost writer of self-help books. And so I was like, you know, if I've read my way to doing all of these other things, why don't I read my way to saving my marriage? And so I went on Amazon and I ordered basically every book that came up when you typed in "marriage." And they came and I started reading them.

And magically -- somewhat magically -- they actually worked. So over a period of four months I read book after book and we did exercise after exercise. And I realized at the end of that time that marriage really isn't about marrying the right person; it's about doing the right things with the person you married. It's about skills. And once we learned these communication skills and forgiveness skills and assertiveness skills and listening skills, and once we learned about humility, which is huge in marriage, everything improved and got better. And it just continues to get better.

Lee Rosen: That is fantastic. You know, I'm interested -- I think a lot of people have sort of done what you've done and they figured out a way to make their marriage work and they've written a book about it, maybe, or at least told their story. But I feel like your experience is a little bit different because you didn't rush right out the day the marriage started working again and write the book. You've been interacting with people through your website now for -- it's been at least a couple of years, hasn't it, where --

Alisa Bowman: Yes.

Lee Rosen: How has that added to your understanding of what works and what doesn't work?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. I mean, one thing, it has really helped me to see that if you've seen one bad marriage, you've seen one bad marriage. If you've seen one good marriage, you've seen one good marriage. Every marriage is different. And we like to have this ideal in our minds of what a good marriage is and we also have an idea in our minds of what a bad marriage is. But really, if you can break out of those labels and just look at your own marriage and stop looking at other people on the outside and stop judging yourself, it can really help.

I mean, from blogging I've just gotten to know so many different people who are struggling in marriage for so many different reasons, ranging from the really extreme problems -- addiction, abuse -- to much less extreme problems, to everything's great except for maybe there's a little bit wrong in the bedroom. But these are all real problems to these people who are struggling with them.

And in society we kind of -- we don't want to talk about these things. We want to pretend that they don't exist. We don't want to talk about women who aren't attracted to their husbands anymore. And we don't want to talk about when people don't feel safe in their own houses.

But these are things if we did talk about them, people could gain a lot of power in their personal situations. They would stop feeling so ashamed and stop feeling so embarrassed and actually be able to do something about that and get to a better place.

So, yeah, the blog's really helped me connect with people. It's helped me see I'm normal, they're normal; we all have nothing to be ashamed of. Nobody taught us these skills in home ec. I mean, in school you learn how to fry an egg -- at least I did -- I learned how to sew, but nobody taught me how to communicate. And so it doesn't mean that you're a failure if you don't know this. Nobody taught it to you.

Lee Rosen: Makes a lot of sense. You talk about that people ought to talk about things and that that really helps. You have led by example on that. You don't hold back on your website. You tell it like it is. I've read your site now for a long time and I know that -- I mean, I know a lot about you, more than you know about me. And I'm just wondering, how does that feel for you and how did your husband react to it?

Alisa Bowman: You know, that's two different questions. So I'll start with the how does it feel for me. I learned a long time ago that I'm a lot happier if I have no secrets. And to be honest, if I'm living an authentic life by my values, I shouldn't have anything to be secretive about. And so if there's something I don't want the world to know, I need to really

think carefully about why that something's in my life at all. And so I feel like I'm living the life I want to live and I'm doing the things I want to be doing and I'm struggling to be the person I want to be. And so there's nothing to be ashamed of.

And so when I share that with others, it's freeing. It gives you a lot of power. It makes you -- you're like, this is who I want to be. This is who I'm becoming. This is who I am. And it helps you figure out who are your supporters? Who are your true friends? Because they're going to embrace that you. And then it helps you figure out the people that are toxic in your life because they're not going to embrace that you.

And so you end up having a true, authentic life. And I just couldn't have it any other way.

But you asked about my husband's reaction. And I think part of it is he's actually -- he would much rather know me. One of the things that happened in our marriage was that I wasn't telling him things. I was expecting him to read my mind and he doesn't have ESP. And so now he has such a better glimpse into what's going on in my head, what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling than he ever did. It's almost like someone gave him the secret key that showed him how to unlock the box.

So our marriage has improved because of the blog. It's improved because of the book. We've grown closer. I've gotten to know him better. He's gotten to know me better. And does he ever have an embarrassing moment? I'm sure he does. If a friend of his mentions something that they read on my site, there are probably moments where he might have some tough moments. But overall, it has really brought us closer.

Lee Rosen: Right. That is fantastic. Now, I like the way that you talk about working on the marriage as a project. It feels like, gosh, that's something we can wrap our arms around and we can focus our energy on, instead of it feeling like just this giant blob of unhappiness.

And I know in the book -- and obviously it's not out. I haven't read it yet and I can't wait to. But I know that you have 10 steps that you take in the book. Give me a feel for how the book is organized and how one attacks this project.

Alisa Bowman: Sure. I mean, the book mostly is the story of my marriage. So it's mostly a memoir. I wrote it so that people could feel normal and realize that, you know what? There's other people out there who are

struggling with similar issues. And I also wrote it so that people could have hope and realize, you know what? There is a way out of this. Not necessarily for every marriage, but for a lot them.

And so most of that is, like, you'll travel with me as I fall in love with my husband. You'll be right there with me as I fall right back out of love with him. And then the story goes on about how we worked on our marriage and the different exercises that worked. And the ones that didn't -- I mean, I included some of the more -- we tried different things. We even tried to learn how to hug correctly because there was a book that suggested that. And that didn't work out so well for us.

So some of the things that we tried did work; some didn't. And it goes into a very honest look at trying to use these things that we've all heard about, like the speaker-listener technique or talking in "I" statements. And they all make sense on paper and then you try to really use them during a real fight in your marriage. And you'll read about what really happens during a real fight in marriage when two people know how they're supposed to be talking but aren't actually doing it that way. So there's that.

And then it's organized by how I attacked my marriage. I looked at what was really wrong. And we were in such a low place that pretty much everything was wrong. But I broke it into sections. So I knew we needed to work on forgiveness because I was feeling so resentful and angry.

And I knew we needed to work on our sex life because it wasn't happening. We weren't even having sex. I couldn't remember the last time we'd done it. And at that point, at the beginning of our project, I didn't care that I didn't remember. I mean, we were in a very bad place there.

And I knew we needed to work on romance because I didn't feel adored by my husband. I knew that we needed to work on intimacy because I really didn't feel close to him and I didn't feel like he felt close to me. And we needed to obviously work on communication because the only times we ever communicated were when we were fighting.

So I broke it into those categories and took one at a time and -- like, we started with forgiveness and slowly worked through that until I felt like, okay, I'm not as resentful. And then we'd move on to the next one and the next one and the next one.

And so the 10 steps at the end, I tried to break it down for people if they wanted to start their own project. They may have different issues in their marriage. Maybe their sex life is great but their communication is terrible. Or maybe it's vice versa. So they don't necessarily have to go in the same order or tackle all of the same areas that we did.

But I did feel like your project starts with you. The most important thing you can do is realize that you're a part of your marriage problem. And believe me, I had a hard time with that concept. I thought that my marriage was all my husband's fault and that if I could just fix him -- and there's a lot of books out there that say that. I think there's one called *Fix Your Husband by Friday*.

So, yeah. I mean, we feel like when things are bad it's the other person's fault. And the first step really is assuming some of the blame and realizing that you're a part of your marriage problems. And not only that, realizing that you're the person who's going to get your marriage to a better place. One of you has to be a leader. And if you're the person reading my book, that means by default you're going to be the leader.

So it's hard because you don't want to do it. I mean, I certainly didn't. I wanted to have a little fairy come into my house and wave a wand over our heads and make our marriage better. But unfortunately it's not that simple.

Lee Rosen: Right. And it's funny. It's kind of -- I don't know how to put this, but it sounds like you were sort of the perfect person to write this book because nothing was working right and you had to work on every aspect of the marriage. I mean, it was sort of wide open for you.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: So I guess that you were in a good spot.

Let me ask you this now. So fast-forward. You've spent a lot of time working on the marriage and obviously it's rolling along and things are going well. But no marriage is perfect. What issues are you working on now? What do you find that you're having to focus on at this point in your life?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. I mean, communication here and there always comes up. My husband and I have had a good -- we've had a really good run. Like, I would say a good six weeks where we haven't gotten in a fight. And whenever I say this, I know tomorrow we're going to get in a fight because I just told you this.

But, yeah, your marriage is never completely cured. And if you expect that you're never going to fight with your spouse again for the rest of your life, that's sort of -- that's another fairy tale right there.

But I think there are things that we'll always be working on, and especially as we get older. I'm always working on romance in the bedroom. It's something that -- it's just a perennial thing. And, like, right now I'm really stressed out with getting my book out and publicized and I'm just completely mentally focused on this book. And that's not good for your sex life for a woman.

I don't know if it affects men in the same way, but for me, I need to be able to turn that off in order to feel sexy. And so we're doing it. That's very important to me to not give that up because I don't want to go back to where we were, where we weren't having sex at all. And so I feel like, okay, if this is -- if we're able to keep it up during this period of time, that's a really good sign for our marriage.

But I feel like in every marriage there's always going to be something that you're probably going to be working on. It may not be full time. It may not be like you were during the midst of your marriage project. But you're right; no marriage is perfect. You're two people who are trying to live together in the same house. And you don't share the same brain and you may not necessarily share the same values. So there's always going to be some negotiation that goes on.

Lee Rosen: Right. So just to kind of wrap up, you know, lots of people out there -- people that are listening to this program and people that will pick up your book -- they really have sort of lost hope. I mean, I think they're in that place where you were, where they've sort of hit the bottom. What's the most important thing to say to those people that really are in that dark place and don't really see that there might be light at the end of that tunnel?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. I would say that no matter what happens, even if your marriage falls apart, if you do a project to try to save your marriage, something will help you and you will end up in a better place. And I knew that at the end of my project and fortunately it did help my marriage. But I also could tell that I was stronger. I had learned all of these skills. I became a better communicator. I'm much more -- like I said, you embrace this concept of humility and that'll help you everywhere in your life.

I mean, your spouse is not the only annoying person that you ever come in contact with. So being able to be assertive helps you everywhere. Being able to communicate helps you everywhere. Being a good listener helps you everywhere. So even if the worst case scenario is that your marriage doesn't work out, doing this project and trying to save your marriage will still help you.

And the other thing is -- and I have to say, I've noticed this from people on my blog -- a lot of marriages really can be saved. I am not going to go out there and say that every single marriage can. I'm not going to promise to lower the divorce rate or anything like that. But I have seen some amazing things happen when people take time to work on their marriages. Just amazing, amazing things.

Lee Rosen: Terrific. Alisa, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I appreciate it.

Alisa Bowman: Well, thank you.

Lee Rosen: If you want to get a copy of *Project Happily Ever After: Saving Your Marriage When the Fairy Tale Falts*, it's going to be on Amazon. It's on Amazon now for pre-order. That's what I'm doing is just clicking the pre-order button; they'll ship it the day they get it. Also in bookstores some time between now and December 28th. You might want to bug your Barnes & Noble, or whoever it is, and see if they've got it yet so that you can get your copy.

I thought it was interesting how Alisa said that a friend made such a difference in her life. Maybe you get a copy for yourself and a copy for a friend.

If you want to keep up with Alisa -- and you should, because her blog is just -- it's fantastically helpful. And it's entertaining, it's funny. It's just a great blog to keep an eye on. ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. And I will put a link to it in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. Until then, stay happily married.

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