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Keeping May-December Romance in Season

This is Stay Happily Married 138-, "Keeping May-December Romance in Season."

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. If your spouse is much older or younger than you are, chances are it's been an issue in your marriage before, whether it's been an issue between the two of you or one involving the opinions of family and friends.

Colette Segalla joins us today to talk about relationships between partners of significantly different ages, to explore the downsides and the upsides and to tell us how you can get the most out of your marriage.

Colette is a therapist with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. She's had extensive training and experience with people of all ages and has also had specific training in the field of adult relationships. She's used her integrated approach to help lots of couples overcome both their individual and relational problems and to improve their relationships.

Colette, welcome to the show.

Colette Segalla: Thank you. It's nice to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited that you could join us. Let me ask you, you know, this topic, May-December romance, why are you interested in it? Is there something about it that has caught your attention?

Colette Segalla: Well, there are more and more relationships where either the husband is significantly older or, more recently, where the wife is significantly older. We're just seeing it more and more and it's just something I think we all have to get a little bit more comfortable with.

Lee Rosen: Got you. So the guys have always been known for doing this. Today there are more of -- what's the term now? A cougar? Is that a politically correct term? There's a TV show.

Colette Segalla: It depends on how it's used. It does have some connotation suggesting that it's an older woman on the prowl for a younger man, and specifically for sexual exploitation. But Linda Franklin has kind of -- had her own campaign to define "the real cougar woman," and that is a smart, sexy, independent, and confident woman who may be in a relationship with a younger man not because he's younger but because he's attracted to her and she's attracted to him.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, so is it fairly common that we really are seeing older women marrying younger men? Is that really something that's happening? Like, you're the -- we talk about relationships and I sometimes forget that you guys are scientists and you really do know the numbers and the data and you do research in all that. So what's the story here? Is it really a phenomenon?

Colette Segalla: It is a phenomenon. It's still relatively uncommon. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's common now, but we are seeing it more and more. It's still -- under 5 percent of marriages are going to be an older woman and a younger man; and a much higher percent, up to about 15 percent, will be an older man and a younger woman.

It's on the increase, though. That's the trend is that we're seeing more and more of these relationships happening. And we see them - - there's some celebrity relationships, so they're getting a little bit more notoriety in the public eye just from some of these celebrity relationships that people see.

Lee Rosen: How big of an age gap does there need to be for it to matter? I mean, obviously a lot of people are a few years apart, but when do you start saying, well, that's an age gap that really is worth sort of understanding and talking about?

Colette Segalla: Usually we say when it's 11 years or more it's a significant age gap.

Lee Rosen: Okay. That's more than I would have thought. That's very interesting. So what are some of the issues that people in these relationships are facing? What's going on with these folks?

Colette Segalla: Well, it's going to be a little bit different when it's an older man versus an older woman. But generally speaking, some of the issues are, number one, the judgment by others or the perception by others that there's something wrong with this relationship, that it's not okay for there to be that significant of an age difference, particularly when it's an older woman and a younger man. That's when you're really going to be subject to the most scrutiny and judgment by family members, by friends, even by perfect strangers. So that's one of the issues.

It can also be an issue when there are children from a previous marriage involved. Or no children and a desire for children but a significant age difference. If there are children from a previous marriage involved, then that complicates matters. And there's a whole host of issues that need to be addressed there.

Also with a significant age difference we may have slightly different perceptions of the world, different world view, if we have a, say, 15-, 20-year age difference. We were brought in a different time and we just may see the world a little bit differently.

And then also we may be transitioning through different life stages when there's a significant age difference. And that can also present some issues that need to be dealt with.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That's really interesting. So you have sort of different groupings in this whole idea of the generation gap within a marriage. I mean, I guess they wouldn't have been attracted to each other if the gap was so gigantic or something, but there's so much change and it happens so quickly. I'm really into all the technology and the gadgets. And you'll talk to somebody that is slightly behind or ahead of you and their focus is totally different than yours. And I'm sure that stretches into every aspect of life. That's very interesting.

What about when these folks -- you mentioned the different life stages. I mean, gosh, you really could have one spouse with kids the same age as their new partner. That must really confuse things.

Colette Segalla: Yes. That's certainly a complicating factor. And often the children of the older spouse are not quite as old but very close in age. Or they -- in some cases, in larger age gaps, they are the same age or even older.

And so it confuses the matter of the stepparent. What role are they to play in the life of these adult children? And the relationships

really need to be addressed in and of themselves. The relationship between the stepparent and the adult children need to be addressed as its own relationship. Not simply as an adjunct to the marriage and the relationship between the marriage partners, but as its own relationship in order to keep things uncomplicated.

Lee Rosen: Right. Gosh, the issues that -- you're just kind of -- as you break it out into different types of situations, just things that had never really occurred to me. I mean, I just imagine the idea of a 65-year-old, say, guy and a 45-year-old woman. And he's ready to hit the assisted living community and sort of scale back and move into the retirement community or whatever, and she's at the peak of her career. I guess you really can be out of sync if you're not thinking these things through and anticipating them.

Colette Segalla: Right. And it depends on the couple and it depends on how long they've been together at that stage. I think if they're getting together at that stage when he's 60 to 65 and she's 40 to 45, then they should be a little bit more clearly in focus because it's a little more imminent on the horizon that he'll be transitioning into a new phase.

But when people get together and they're younger -- say he's 50 and she's 35 or she's 30 -- and he's very vibrant and he's still in the height of his career and it doesn't look like retirement is anywhere - - is coming any time soon, then it can be very easy to put that out of one's mind and not take into account the fact that there will come a time when, just like you say, he's ready to maybe not necessarily go into assisted living at that age but he may be --

Lee Rosen: I know I'm going to get letters for that one.

Colette Segalla: -- ready to slow down significantly and she's really at the height of her career and her work life and social life and what have you.

Lee Rosen: Right. So when you look at all these different issues and all these different problems that folks can face when they're coming to the relationship with a big spread in age, how do you sort of approach all of this? What kind of steps do you advise people to take when they're dealing with all these issues?

Colette Segalla: Well, a big part of it has to do with just having one's eyes open and knowing that there are going to be issues specific to the age gap that are going to come up in the relationship. And talking about them, for one, of course. Talking about them is going to get all the issues out on the table and make sure people are heading into the issues aware of what the factors are.

And then also knowing that there's going to be some issues, you can sort of adjust your approach and your attitude towards it by just saying, you know, we're going to need to find some ways to accommodate our differences. And that's really very much like any marriage, any relationship.

We always have issues that need to be addressed and we'll have to find ways to accommodate our differences and to compromise. And it just so happens that in an age gap relationship they're going to be specific to age-related matters. So it's kind of a similar approach.

We have to find ways to communicate about it, find ways to accommodate differences between people. And to be accepting that, although there's an age difference, although there may be some complicating factors -- such as children or such as being in different life stages -- that those are not insurmountable obstacles and they don't mean that there's something wrong with the relationship.

Lee Rosen: You know, you're dealing with people who are -- and obviously you're dealing with folks that are facing these issues, but you're also dealing with a range of other issues in marriages. Is this a harder problem or an easier problem for people to work through?

Colette Segalla: You know, I would say from my experience working with couples that typically when they come in for marriage counseling they're not coming in because of the age gap differences. There's other relationship issues that are coming into play.

Not to say that the age gap differences haven't been a problem in their relationship that they've had to work through, but usually they're not the key; they're not the one single thing that kind of says to them, we've really got to get help on this. It's just -- there are other dynamics in the relationship that usually need to be worked on, other than just the age gap issues.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes a lot of sense. We've talked a lot about the concerns that relationships like this can raise, but is there any upside, are there any benefits of having an age gap in a marriage?

Colette Segalla: Absolutely. And when you talk to the people who are in marriages where there's a significant age gap, you get a lot of different responses. One is that you do get the wisdom of the older person in the marriage, and that brought into the mix can add a lot of richness. You also get the youthfulness of the younger person. And typically you'll hear the older person saying it's really nice to be

around the energy and vitality and youthfulness of the younger person.

You also get kind of a mix of social circles. You have a broader range of ages when you combine social circles and that can be enriching as well.

So there are certainly a lot of benefits. As well as there may be a benefit either if the man or the woman is older to one of them being more financially stable. Not to say that that means they'll be taking care of the younger person, but it may mean that at least one of you in the marriage is stable while perhaps the other is getting on his or her feet. So that can be a benefit as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. I want to ask you sort of two sides to this question. Part one is, when you think about folks in these situations what do you consider to be the single most important thing to keep in mind if you're the younger person married to a much older partner?

Colette Segalla: Well, I think the thing to keep in mind is that concerns about the age difference will come and go. There will be times when it will absolutely not be an issue at all. And there'll be other times when it seems like a really big issue. And at those times, that's when it's important to remember that there are going to be fluctuations, that they're going to come and go and that you've got to keep your focus on what brought you together as partners in the first place.

I'm assuming there would be commonalities of interest, there would be attraction, there would be enjoyment of each other's company. And those are the things to keep in mind at a time when it seems like it's difficult, specifically because of the age difference.

And over time, as things settle back down again, there may be -- it may be an enriching experience to have made a transition or to have integrated one's stepchildren into the picture that you wouldn't have gotten if there hadn't been a relationship with a significant age difference.

Lee Rosen: Now, what if I flip that question upside down and I ask you, for a much younger partner -- if you're married to a much younger partner and you're the older partner in the relationship, what's the most important thing for you to keep in mind?

Colette Segalla: Well, I think the most important thing to keep in mind is that having patience and humor will go a long way in dealing with the ups and downs when it comes to being with somebody much younger. That although you may feel like you have lived through

many of the experiences that you're seeing your younger spouse go through and you may think you have all the answers or know the best way, that it's for your partner, your spouse, to find his or her way. Of course, with your input. But keep in mind that they're in their own process and that needs to be respected, just as yours was when you were at that stage.

Lee Rosen: Right. Terrific advice. Fantastic. Well, it sounds like the May-December relationships may actually be pretty successful, especially if you ever need a little bit of help if you get it, because it doesn't sound like it's an overwhelming issue to deal with. It sounds pretty manageable.

Colette Segalla: Yeah. It is manageable. And there's a lot of statistics that say that many of these marriages are very enduring marriages. They're as good of statistics for staying together as they are in kind of the general population of marriages.

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

Colette Segalla: You're welcome. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: You can find out more about Colette and all of her experience by visiting the website at LepageAssociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well. Also, the office number in Durham, North Carolina, is (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will come back again next week. In the meantime, if you have ideas, comments, suggestions, feedback, we love to hear it. We respond to every bit of feedback we get.

A couple of ways you can get up with us. One way is to call our listener 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.