

Lee: This is Stay Happily Married: I Don't Want A Divorce!

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Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Today's world is one of instant satisfaction and gratification. We want what we want, when we want it. Before we know it, our interest quickly fades and we're bored with our latest toy. In a world that teaches us "out with the old and in with the new," how can anybody expect a marriage to last when it's not as shiny and as new as it once was?

Today, my guest is Dr. David Clarke. He's joining us to share his experience in turning around marriages that are on the brink of divorce. He's got a new book, "I Don't Want a Divorce: A 90-Day Guide to Saving Your Marriage." In it, he uses his 20-plus years of experience helping couples to get beyond the old and destructive habits and to build a brand new relationship with brand new habits, and to do all of that in just 90 days.

Now, David's not new to the book-writing business. He's authored an additional nine books. He has a master's degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. This is where the rubber meets the road. He's got 25 years in private practice, specializing in couple's therapy. If all of that wasn't enough to take in, David also travels all over the country presenting marriage seminars. He lives in Florida with his wife, Sandy, and their four kids.

David, I'm excited to have you on the show. Welcome.

David: Thanks, Lee. It's my pleasure.

Lee: I'm glad you wrote this book. I'm curious about the subtitle, really, "I Don't Want a Divorce: A 90-Day Guide to Saving Your Marriage." Can you really turn it around in 90 days?

David: You really can. If I get two people that are willing to really work hard, go all out, it can really swing around in 90 days. Most of the heavy work is done in 90 days. Breakthroughs are achieved. Then I don't see them anymore, or they don't need the book anymore. They just continue progressing. But I've seen it happen.

Lee: Well, I guess it shouldn't surprise me. You're an expert. You've been doing this for a long time. You've learned your way around a marriage. I'm curious, what are

the most common issues that you're seeing that are leaving people with the feeling that divorce is the only option?

David: What I see is a combination of breakdown in a number of areas. Communication typically goes first. Then we have inability to resolve conflicts. When you're not communicating, and you're not emotionally close, it's like a nuclear chain reaction. Now we're far apart, we have more conflict, and we have less motivation and ability to solve those conflicts.

Issues that have always been there, but are in the background because we're in love, now they really become a problem. "I don't like it when she does that." "I don't like it when he does this." "That's always bugged me." These things crowd in. We add in with the lack of passion that all of those things bring, if you have children, the business of life and career. So it's just a steady decline.

Then I think it's nearly universal, seven years in, there's a lot to that "seven year itch," seven to ten years in, your first marriage is over. You've lost it. It's broken down. At this point, we have to turn it around. That's what couples face, and culture screams, "Get a divorce. Quit. Move on." Sometimes that may be necessary. But most of the time, in my opinion, it's not. You can save it and you can make it a great marriage.

Lee: Right. Seven to ten years, I hear people say that, "the seven year itch." That really is a pretty classic time when you start to see these meltdowns.

David: Oh boy, it is. It's almost classic. My wife and I were in the same boat, frankly. We had four kids. Before we realized what was happening, we got four kids! We love them. But you can have a child-centered marriage, which we did for a few years, and that's not good either. It's about Sandy and me. I married the blonde because I loved her. The kids came after. We learned things on our own. Then it translated to my office and to the books I write. We turned things around. I know other people can do it too.

Lee: You've got a laboratory at home. In the book, you categorize troubled marriages into three different types that are at risk for divorce. Even though the spouse may or may not be thinking about divorce, you've got these categories of folks that, you think, are the folks that need to be worried. What are the categories that you talk about?

David: Three main ones. It's what I call "we're unhappy, but willing to work on it." Two people come in. They know they've lost their marriage and they're not happy. They know divorce may be looming. "Gosh, we don't want to live this way, but we're both here and we're both actually willing to take a series of steps to solve the marital crisis and really get back on track." A lot of folks I see are in that category.

Now the second category, very common, I only see one spouse because the other spouse won't come in. That's called "my spouse won't change." It could be the guy or the woman who won't go to a seminar, who won't go to therapy, who won't read a book, and who's pretty content with the lousy marriage. They're not very emotionally connected to anybody. "What's the big fuss? This is the way it's going to be until I die." They can sleep at night. They don't care. The partner is the one that's dying, and they know all that they're missing. What do you do with a person like that? Well, there's a whole program I have for that spouse. One person really can change things.

Finally, I see a lot of couples in this situation, a crisis has occurred. I call it "my spouse has sinned the big-time." Very often there's been adultery. I saw a couple just this morning. They were struggling with an affair. It's just come to light. I'm on a series of steps I want to put them through to heal. It could be alcohol, could be drugs, could be verbal, domestic violence, some kind of abuse, or gambling. I mean, something big, something really huge that's happened. Now, "Boy, this has blown us up. What do we do?"

Lee: "Unhappy but we're willing to work on it," I guess you're pretty pleased when you see one of those walk in. Do you think they're at big risk, or are they going to be able to pull it off if they're coming in together with that kind of attitude?

David: It's almost a guaranteed success. I love seeing those kinds of couples. If they really are serious and both are saying, "What do we have to do?" yeah, best-case scenario. "We're unhappy, but you know what? What do we have to do?"

Lee: Right. Say you've got the "my spouse won't change," which in a lot of ways I feel like that's a really lethal situation where one spouse is basically okay with having this relationship that stinks, at least it stinks for their spouse. How do you compare that to this "my spouse has sinned"? In a crazy sort of way, I almost feel like the "my spouse has sinned," at least everybody's engaged in the conversation at that point. It might be easier to save those marriages. Am I on base or off?

David: No, you're right on track. I really prefer, clinically, to have a big crisis. Everything's in pieces. People are energized. "How dare you? I can't believe . . ." If you can move through them, that really is a catalyst for the reconnection. Passion! Energy!

The person who could care less, that's probably the worst-case scenario, because they're like a rock. They're not budging. My job, then, is to work with the victim of that, the spouse who wants to do something. We're going to create a crisis for that person who won't change. No matter what it takes, we're going to shake that person up.

The worst thing you can do is just tolerate that, just live that way. You'll die living that way, emotionally, spiritually, and physically even. We've got to create a crisis. I love a crisis, as a therapist. That's what I do.

Lee: I can see the benefit of that, the value in that. You said with the "my spouse won't change" people, that you really can save a marriage even if only one spouse is in the game. How in the world do you do that? I can see the spouse that shows up in your office saying, "Okay. Well, I'll just accept that we're not very happy." Then you've saved the marriage. Are things really going to change in that relationship? Is it going to be any better?

David: There's an opportunity for change. It's certainly true that if I put the person through what I put them through and they're trying to get their spouse's attention, they stop playing their part of the game, which basically is codependency, enabling, "I'm just going to live this way." They've made adjustments they should not have made. When they stop that part of the game and they give a series of indirect confrontations, going through a six-week program that I have, if the person doesn't respond to that, okay, then this is crystal clear they're never going to change. At that point, I never recommend divorce, but I'll say, "Let God be your guide." The marriage is basically over. You're not kidding around. It brings it to a head one way or the other. I will recommend separation at that point, most of the time. If the person could care less about that too, well, okay, then that makes your path pretty clear.

Lee: Right. That does sound like the toughest spot to be in and to dig your way out of. Most people, when they come to you, which of these types are they? What's the majority? Are they these "unhappy but willing to work on it," "my spouse won't change," or "my spouse has sinned"? What do you see the majority of people coming in like?

David: The majority of what I have is probably two and three. "My spouse won't change" and the spouse that comes in goes, "I'm just sick of living this way. I've lost my love and respect. I'm willing to make one more try. What would you suggest?"

Probably, if I had to do percentage-wise, people come to me in crisis. So it's "my spouse has sinned big time." Probably 70% of the couples I see are in that situation. I'm known for my affair recovery work, so a lot of affairs, domestic violence, if someone's really blown it. We start with that kind of a crisis.

Lee: I don't know if you've noticed this, David, but you told me earlier, you said, "I really like it when they say they're unhappy but willing to work on it. That makes my life easy." Then you just said, "But there aren't very many of them coming in."

David: Yeah, I know. If only my life were a little easier. I see the worst kind of marriages. Even when two people come in, it's very rare to have somebody say, "We're both going to try." One person usually wants to try. One's been dragged

there and they don't want to be there. I've got to win that person over. I'm pretty good about doing that, engaging them and drawing them in, because they have no hope and they don't care. Well, there's a way to get that person's heart engaged by putting them through the steps. It's rare that it start off that way, which is too bad.

Lee: For a lot of us, coming to see an expert and to get help, that's a tough step. I think we're all thinking, "If we just hold on, maybe this will work out." Especially, I think, a lot of guys. We really don't want to have to go into the counselor's office and subject ourselves to this kind of scrutiny and talk about all of this stuff.

What does life feel like at home? When have we reached that point of, "You know what? This is actually serious"? If it was a physical symptom, we'd be like, "Oh yeah, I can no longer lift my arm. I'd better go to the doctor." What does your life feel like at home when it's time to get on the phone and schedule that appointment and get going with this process?

David: I'd say if it's been a couple of months. Most of them wait way too late. If it's been a couple of months where you've really noticed we don't spend quality time together anymore. In fact, couples that are in trouble avoid each other. "We don't do well when we talk. We don't have personal conversations. We focus on the kids, their activities."

I would look at your basic evening together, and that will tell you all that you need to know. What kind of time do you have together? Do you eat together at a meal, or do you eat separate? Does he watch TV in the living room? Are you talking on the phone? There'll be a terrible separateness that you've adjusted too, but you're realizing, "Whoa. We have very little in common." Sex is infrequent if it happens at all. There's really no passion left. We are maybe friends, if that. We are not lovers. We are not passionate. I don't get excited about seeing my spouse. That's what you're looking at. So many couples fit into that category.

That's why most divorces happen 7 to 10 years in, or 18 to 20 years in when the kids go off to college. When you have the empty nest and you have nothing in terms of a marriage, poof! Then it explodes. You realize there's nowhere to hide. There's no buffer.

So I would look at your basic daily routine, especially the evening time. That will show you if you've lost it. And it's okay if you've lost it, because you can get it back.

Lee: I'll tell you, I've talked to a lot of folks that listen to this show, and when you say, "A couple of months," they're going to be like, "A couple of months? Whoa, we've been miserable for years."

David: Oh, I know. I say they don't have to. You adjust. We're pretty good as human beings at adjusting to all kinds of misery. Well, you know what? As soon as possible, you need to reach out for help.

Lee: Well, I think that's good advice. If you see it over a couple of months, it's not going to get any better by itself. If you don't do something about it, you're either going to end up divorced or you're going to spend a few years being miserable, so you might as well nip it in the bud and get going.

What do you find that people are doing before they come and see you? Personally, my first stop would be the Barnes & Noble in the self-help section. "There's got to be a book for this, or a video or something." Are you finding people are doing things like that before they decide, hey, it's really time to go visit with a professional? How are they trying to fix it?

David: Typically, they'll try a few things. Most of the time it's going to be the woman that's done some effort and the man really hasn't. The woman's going to get a book, read it. If she says to her husband, "Read that book," he's not going to read it. Men don't read. Most men really can't read, it seems like. Just kidding. They just know grays.

They might have read a book, parts of a book. They may have gone to a marriage seminar. For serious issues, a marriage seminar may be a catalyst, but it's not going to solve the problems. People in my area, increasingly I see a lot of Christian people who are churchgoers. They will have seen their pastor. They feel comfortable with him. They know he loves them. They'll sit down for a session or two. Very often he'll refer them to me. They've tried that.

Maybe they've talked, especially the woman may have talked, to a family member, her mother, a sister, a close friend. They've gotten some advice, but it's just not amounted to anything. It hasn't helped.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. Let's say they get in the door and you're going to get to work on them. I'm curious for a behind-the-scenes look. If they really want to make this marriage work, what are the steps that you tell them they ought to take? What are they going to do?

David: Here's what I say, every couple I see, first time. I get a history of each, of course, and of the marriage. Then I'll say, "Here are the steps we're going to follow." I may sell them the book "I Don't Want a Divorce."

First you gather a support team. You never heal alone. If it's just the two of you, I'll tell them, "You're going nowhere. You need help." Maybe it's another couple that they know and trust and they're going to come alongside and pray for them, support them through the process, hold them accountable. Maybe the man has a

close friend, a confidant, same sex. Maybe the woman has that. That's fine. Maybe a pastor will come alongside.

It's a small team, but you've got to have a small support team. It's so discouraging and so difficult that, on your own, you get picked off. It's better to have a team. I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, so I will say, "You need to lean on God. Make it a matter of prayer. Go to church, find some spiritual support." I think that's critical.

Then I'll say, and of course I've got one, "You need to follow a clear, detailed plan. For any endeavor, if you're going to be successful, you'd better have a plan or you're not going to make it. We're not going to wing it here." I say, "I'm like Arnold's rug. I have the one way. We're going to go through these steps because I know they work. There's no guarantee, but they've worked for hundreds of couples. We're going to follow a clear plan. You're going to do it my way."

A good therapist doesn't allow couples to do it their way because their way hasn't worked. If they don't do it my way, I won't see them. If they haven't done a homework assignment, if they're blocking on something, we'll work through the resistance. If they simply refuse, I'll say, "Well, when you have done that assignment, you call me."

It shocks them. They think I want their money. I've got other people to see. I'm not going to see them and have them frustrate me because they don't want to do a certain step. Every step is designed for a specific purpose.

Lee: I mentioned earlier how much I love the subtitle, "A 90-Day Guide to Saving Your Marriage." In the book, you really do lay out a 90-day, a three-month, plan for solving the problems. For me anyway and my personality, that really appeals to me, having that structure. I know you're giving them the "my way or the highway" speech, but do they naturally jump into the plan? Do they like that structure?

David: Some do, some don't. One usually does, one doesn't. There's resistance to change. I navigate through that. They're spending some pretty serious money to see me, so that also is a motivator. I'm saying, "This is how it works." They fight me. One person will typically fight it. But once they realize I'm not kidding, I won't see them, I'm not just kidding around. I'm not going to waste time. If they haven't done an assignment, then I'm just not going to see them, and I won't see them again until they have it done. That really seems to galvanize them.

I'm okay with them not coming back, because I know that case would have been a failure anyway. I'm a pretty up-front, blunt person. I'll work very hard for people, but if they won't follow the steps that I know they need to take, then you know what? Don't come back.

Lee: I love that approach. I'll tell you, that would get my attention. No fooling around. You do it or you're out of here. What are some of the key steps they're going to take during that 90 days?

David: How we always start is what I call the letter of responsibility, A and B. This is their homework for the second session. I want you to sit down and I want you to write me a letter. I want you to write it in two parts. The first part is the mistakes you have made in the marriage. We're not talking about your spouse. You know their mistakes, but it's a waste of time talking about that. You can't do a thing about it, as you've already proven.

We're going to look in the mirror at what have you done wrong. I want you to search your heart. I want you to pray if you want to. You put down the things you've done wrong in the marriage, regrets, mistakes, weaknesses. That's part A. Part B of the same letter is what you're going to do about it. How would you like to improve in these areas?

That is a powerful technique, if they'll do that initially. Most folks want to just talk about what he's doing or what she's doing wrong. I just cut them off. First session, I'll entertain some of that, but I say, "We're through doing that now. Now we're going to talk about what you've done wrong." I can only change what I've done wrong. If they start that way, it's a good start.

Lee: That makes sense. Now, I know in the 90 days, you have them writing. This is not a one-shot deal. They're doing a fair amount of writing during the program. Why do you do that? I think that's unusual. What's that about?

David: I have the clients write their hands off when they see me. It's really something.

Number one, it really tests their commitment. When you sit down to write something, it requires time. It requires planning. It requires thought. If I'm going to show up at my therapist's office and just shoot the breeze, that's not really very committed. If they'll actually write, that is a test of their commitment. People that won't write, I'm not going to fool with because they're not really wanting to change.

When you write something, it forces you to focus on the real issues you're writing on, really think about them on a deep level, because you're expressing yourself not just verbally, but in a very concrete way. Deeper information and deeper insights come through the writing. I've seen that throughout my career. I'm never going to stop doing it that way.

People will say, "Oh, I'm not much of a writer." I say, "We're not publishing this." They try to worm out of doing it. Or they'll write it and they'll want me to read it. Now, on my plan, when you've written it, you have to read it out loud. It's your material, not mine.

It just works like a charm. People try to wriggle out of it. If they do a halfway job, I'll say, "You're going to have to do that again." They're horrified. "I have to write this again?" "Yeah, it was a lousy job. Let's work on this." Writing, I think, is just critical.

Lee: You're driving your people through this 90 days. I don't want to give you a hard time, but you sound like a bit of a taskmaster. You're going to make this happen.

David: I'm pretty tough.

Lee: Yeah. You're in Tampa. You're doing your thing. You're kind of a guru. People are coming to you because they know, "Hey, this is the expert." If you're living somewhere else and you walk into a bookstore, you go on Amazon, and you buy this book, are you going to be able to save your marriage without having David sitting in the room with you?

David: Having this book is like having David sitting in the room with you.

Lee: Okay. Yeah?

David: It's worth a try. I've had some input from people that they've actually gone through it together. Now, it takes committed people or just one spouse reading it. It can really make a difference. Often, though, what they'll do is they'll buy the book and it becomes a catalyst. They see the whole program and it gives them some hope. "Look, this can actually work." Case studies and all that are in the book.

Then what they'll do is they'll find an experienced therapist in their area. He'll have his own program, or she, but very often it dovetails pretty nicely with what I say in my book. This is not rocket science. This is my unique way, but it's not horribly different or really strange. It can be a great addition to even seeing your own therapist.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. I want to remind everybody that's listening, David, the book is "I Don't Want a Divorce: A 90-Day Guide to Saving Your Marriage." We're going to put a link to it in the show notes where you can get it at Amazon. Also, information about David is at his website at DavidClarkeSeminars.com.

David, we've covered a lot of ground today. Anything else, any words of wisdom you would like to impart for our folks before we go?

David: I'd say two things. I would say never give up. Do not quit, at least until you've made the best possible effort to save your marriage. You've got to live with yourself even should your spouse not change, they're divorcing you, and there's

nothing you can do about it. When you do the best you can do, you can live with yourself. That helps your adjustment post-divorce. That is important.

The second thing I'd say, and this is, of course, in the book, is to not be afraid to lean on God. No matter what your faith or your beliefs about God, man alive. He is there. There is a God. He loves you. You can know him through Jesus. If you will come to that relationship and lean on him, that will make a huge difference, again, whether the marriage works or not.

Those are the two things I'd leave you with.

Lee: Terrific advice. David, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it.

David: Well, I enjoyed it. Thanks, Lee.

Lee: Thanks to all of you for listening. Let me remind you again. The book is "I Don't Want a Divorce: A 90-Day Guide to Saving Your Marriage." It's at Amazon.com. I'll put a link to it. Shoot me an email 90 days from now when you've been working with the book. Let me know how that worked out for you. We'll pass that word along to David and to others. The website is DavidClarkeSeminars.com. I'll also put a link to that here in the show notes.

I appreciate you listening in today. We always love your feedback, comments, and insights about the program. Keep them coming. You can reach us in a couple of different ways. One is on the comment line at 919-256-3083. You can also email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

Until next time, I'm Lee Rosen. Stay Happily Married.

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