

Lee: This is Episode number 163 of Stay Happily Married: Here Comes the Judgment.

Announcer: 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](http://Rosen.com).

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. They say that hindsight is 20/20. We don't often see the real problems in a relationship until after they've exploded. Today, we're going to mix it up a little bit. Our guest is one of the judges from Divorce Court. With couples divorcing at an alarming rate, it might be time for us to call on a new type of relationship expert: somebody that knows the ins and outs of divorce, someone who can teach us from our mistakes, or even better, from somebody else's mistakes. I think that's really the best way to learn.

Judge Lynn Toler has worked with divorcing couples for years. She was elected to the municipal court, and then she went on to host shows like Divorce Court, Power of Attorney, Decision House. She graduated from Harvard University. She went to law school at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

On top of all of the judging and dealing with families in crisis, she's found time to crank out two books. One of them is "My Mother's Rules". It's a practical guide to becoming an emotional genius. The other one is "Put It in Writing". It's a book that gives readers concrete, conflict-free solutions for solving difficult situations that arise.

She's in a lot of ways, really the perfect guest for us on Stay Happily Married so that we can learn and keep our marriages on strike. Judge Lynn Toler, I am so glad to have you. Welcome to the program.

Lynn: Oh, thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here.

Lee: You've spent years presiding over couples that have come looking for a divorce. What would you say is the most common complaint that you've heard from couples looking to split?

Lynn: The most common complaint I hear is he or she, depending on who's doing the speaking, doesn't understand what I'm asking for. They have a failure to be able to resolve conflict. They don't have any method or pattern to do that. They don't know how to get to the middle. They don't know how to give and take. So, what happens to the couples, especially the ones that come to Divorce Court, is they have small issues that mount into big ones because they never resolve any of them as they come along.

Lee: Right. Yeah, I see that way too often. Are there trends or patterns that you've noticed? Are there things about couples that you can almost predict that this is the type of couple that's going to be headed for trouble?

Lynn: Oh, absolutely. First of all, when couples are very, very young, they have difficulty compromising. So, they're going to have trouble right off the top because they want what they want. When you're older, you're more patient. But, when you have a young couple or very headstrong people, that don't know how not to get what they want on Monday so they can get what they want on Tuesday, they're headed for trouble right away.

When you have very concrete ideas about gender roles in a society that no longer is so specific about gender roles, you have one person who's living in the 1950s Norman Rockwell sense and another person who has moved on from that, and they haven't discussed it before they got married, again, there's a warning sign that they're not going to be able to come to an accommodation because they're very rigid about what's right and what's wrong. This is right, and that is wrong, and compromise never comes into the picture.

There's also those who cannot communicate and understand that women and men are different. Women are not broken men, and men aren't crazy women. We all come at it emotionally different. Neither gender needs to be fixed, but both genders need to be understood for who they are so you can come to some kind of understanding of the other gender without being angry that they are who they are and feel the way that they feel.

Lee: Right, just some level of acceptance that we aren't all the same. Right? Are there signs that you see? Do you see sort of a first warning sign that if somebody's sitting there listening to the two of us today, and they see this sign in their marriage, that there are compatibility problems, they are headed down the road toward a breakup. What would be that red flag?

Lynn: I think the one sign that I would look for was a sense that they don't understand the other person's position. You don't have to agree with me, but you have to, at least, listen long enough to try to understand what I'm trying to tell you. If you're with a person that can't do that, or if you're a person that can't do it, that is a big warning sign. They know what's right; this is the way it should be. If you can't do that, you can't compromise, and that is a huge warning sign. I think that's the one that I would point to.

Lee: Yeah. So, if you're really walking around thinking, "I just don't get why my partner is thinking that way. I really can't figure out what in the world could be going on in their head, why they think that," then you kind of know you better get some help figuring that out, or you're going to be in big trouble.

Lynn: Right. And you've got to care what's going on in their head. You have to care what they're thinking even though, car A is the correct car to get, I don't know what the problem is. You have to be able to say, sometimes there isn't a right or wrong answer, or we can both think something about a particular thing and neither one of us be wrong.

There's opinion, there's shades of gray, there's different emotional needs. You don't have to be thirsty in order to get your spouse a glass of water. If you don't understand that other people have other needs and desires that you don't understand and you must meet them whether or not you understand them, then that is an ill-fated union.

Lee: Right. That makes a tremendous amount of sense. Now, if somebody is in trouble, you've got a couple listening to us today and whoever's listening knows this is not going well. You've had years of experience working with these folks. Is there any advice you've got that can help somebody that really is on the verge, on the edge of a breakup? Is there something that they can do to bring their marriage back from the brink?

Lynn: I know this is going to just sound so very trite and every day, but get a second set of eyes on the matter. The earlier you go to marriage counseling, before people get entrenched in their positions, and give whatever you're angry about or upset about some sense of objectivity so you can step away from how you feel long enough to see the situation for what it is, I think that is the best thing that you can do.

And also what you can do, when people are right at the edge and on the brink, you start to see what I call the washing machine effect. They keep arguing. They can't even tell you by the end of the week all the things they argued about and why they argued about them, because they're just angry. And they're living on that emotion and they're having the same argument over and over again without resolution because they're really not arguing about the thing.

They're just angry at the other person, and it just takes the form of an argument about this particular thing. Someone, one person has to call a cease-fire. One person has to refuse to engage into that and say, "You know, I'm not upset about the car. I'm not upset about this. I think it's something else altogether. Let's come to each other at another point in time and talk about what's really wrong."

You really have to get out of that washing machine, that all day anger thing that builds on one another, and step away from what you're currently doing long enough to figure out what the underlying problem is. Even if you can't figure out what the underlying problem is, you've got to realize that the little problem that you're having all day, every day isn't the real source of discontent.

Lee: Right. I love that: get out of that washing machine. Now, you've been married for 20 something years, if I have my facts straight.

Lynn: Yes, 23 years.

Lee: 23 years, OK. You're sitting there, watching these couples going through divorces. I am guessing that you've learned a lot about keeping your marriage on track from what you've seen in your courtroom. I'm not suggesting that after 23 years your marriage might be stagnating, but I do want to know what advice do you have for others who might be in a marriage... You know, 20 years is a long time. If they're feeling like things maybe are getting a little boring, that it's a little stagnant, how do you kick it back into gear and keep it going for another 23 years?

Lynn: That's such a good question that you asked because I have a couple of friends, and I found that they have very exciting marriages. What I found is they regularly do something fun. My husband and I, we get along, everything is cool, but we hadn't inserted that let's go to this

new restaurant somewhere and have fun, something on a regular basis. So, the date night out thing. Again, it sounds trite and it's small, but it is so fun and it does rekindle.

And also, if you find a new couple that things the four of you can do together, because people watching and touching, everybody is kind of in that same mode, in that same head, you learn, you see. You refresh your vision of one another. So, it's always about going back to what you did a little bit when you were dating and finding something new within the context of what you're already doing.

Lee: Right.

Lynn: It sounds like an easy and simple thing, but it makes a huge difference.

Lee: Yeah. I absolutely agree with you. Now, you're a judge. You're familiar with rules, and that's important to running the courtroom and the legal system and all that. And I know that one of the first books you wrote is called "My Mother's Rules". I'm wondering, do you think that couples need rules in their relationship? Is that an important part of making a marriage work?

Lynn: I think it's an extraordinarily important part. I think it's the part that people don't get, and part of the reason why even these days, more than ever before, it's so easy for marriages to fail. We find the guy or the gal that we love. We marry them and we expect that if we have made the appropriate choice, things will work themselves out. You don't set up a game plan for how you're going to disagree about matters. You don't sit down and work out a chore chart because these days everybody's working. No one knows who's going to clean the toilet. There are presumptions made that everybody may not go by.

If you don't have any rules for doing that, and you don't have any procedures in place to keep the marriage fresh, you have to schedule a date night because life gets in the way. If there's no rule that we must do a certain thing, it tends not to get done. If there are no rules for how we're going to argue or resolve disputes, then we can't go about it in an efficacious way.

So, I think rules are very important. People don't want to have rules because they want to be in love and be free and be happy. But I believe that if you've got rules about how you do things, that allows the love to exist and be free and be happy in an easier fashion. You know what I mean? I tell my kids all the time, if you obey the rules now, you can do whatever you want later. If you get good grades now, and restrict and decide and get your things, your life can be easy on the back end.

I think that we have to get over this sense that it should be love and easy and soul mates and right. Let's have some patterns. Let's have some procedures and processes in place to make sure that this thing stays strong and together instead of just saying, you know, the movie "Waiting to Exhale?" I want to marry him, I want to exhale. There's no exhaling. This is the time to get to work.

Lee: Right. So, your book, "My Mother's Rules", inspired me to ask you this question. I want to ask you about honesty in a relationship. You've seen a lot of relationships where there's not

been 100% honesty. There's been a lot less than that in the ones that end up in your courtroom. Would you say that 100% honesty in a relationship, does that do more harm than good?

Lynn: I don't believe in 100% honesty. I say that with a caveat. Here's the thing: sometimes unkindnesses disguise themselves as honesty. There's no reason for me to tell my husband that, "Man, that guy was good-looking at the store the other day." There's no reason to tell my husband that some guy from my past tried to contact me as long as I've got my rules together. I don't holler back on Facebook to old boyfriends.

Lee: Right.

Lynn: But there's no need to tell him that he did it in the first place. I don't think that's hiding things from him. It's dishonesty by omission, but if my head is in the right place and my heart is in the right place, there's no reason to invite all of that kind of dissension in the home by letting him know about things that would upset him, and he doesn't need to know about them.

I believe in direct honesty. If you ask me what is A, B, or C, I think that you must always be honest in your response, except when your wife asks you, "Do I look fat?" And the answer is no, no matter what.

Lee: That's right. No, dear, not at all. Right. I'm with you. What about from your perspective? It seems like a huge percentage of couples live together before marriage. Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?

Lynn: Statistically, it's demonstrated that it's a terrible thing. Statistically, people who live together before they get married break up a lot more than people who just get married. I think that sometimes people who live together and then get married get married because things aren't going well and they're trying to shore it up, or somebody gets pregnant and they get married.

The decision to marry after living together isn't, "Wow. This is really right. Let's do it now," it often has something to do with, she's finally, "Look, if you don't marry me, I'm going to go." It's not always, "Wow. We've lived together long enough to know that we're really right for each other." I think it does happen that way, but I think often it doesn't happen that way.

I also think that the decision to be with somebody in a lifetime is a huge decision that should be complex and it should be certain. I think that when you live together first, statistically it just shows it doesn't help out.

Lee: Right. Well, you've seen the data. If that's what the data tells us, then I guess we've got to listen.

Lynn: That's what it is.

Lee: Right. You've watched all these couples. How long should somebody date before they get married? What's the right amount of time?

Lynn: I think at least two years.

Lee: Wow. OK.

Lynn: I do, because the first year you're dating. Dating involves a fair amount of mutual exchange of misinformation. I always looked good when I started dating my husband, you know what I mean? And the house was picked up. All these kind of things were happening. You've got to get six months to get past that. Then you have to start discovering who that person really is.

Then you have to start knowing that person in all different circumstances: when things aren't going well for them, when they are sick, their involvement with their family, what kind of family they come from, what kind of script he's reading from, because everybody reads from the script that they had at home. They either repeat it or decide not to do it, but either way, what they've lived and who they've been around determines what they do. My question to people is, when they ask me, "Why wait so long?" I say, "Why not?"

If you're looking to do 'til death do you part, and these days that's talking 50 or 60 years, what is 24 months?

Lee: Right. It's nothing in the grand scheme of things. You're exactly right.

Lynn: It's nothing in the grand scheme of things.

Lee: That's right. Let me ask you this. If you had one minute with every newlywed couple... They said "I do," and they walked down from getting married, and you got to talk to them for 60 seconds, what piece of advice would you give them? What would be the most valuable thing you could tell them?

Lynn: Whenever you two are in a dispute and your spouse says something, you need to repeat it to them in your own words; a) to make sure you heard exactly what they were saying, and b) to make sure they know you heard what they were saying. I know a lot of people argue because, you know, "He keeps saying this is my position, this is my position," "She keeps saying this is my position. This is my position." Until you understand the other person's position, you have no common ground to work with. So, I would always say, at the very beginning of a disagreement, you make sure you state the other person's position just to make sure you're arguing about the right thing.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. In your first book, "My Mother's Rules", you talk about the rules and the guidelines that your mother raised you on, all of which I think are really solid. They're all good advice for anybody to hear. I want to ask you, if you had to pick three of those rules, and say that those were the most important ones to remember, especially when you're dealing with your spouse, what three rules would you put at the top of the list?

Lynn: I think I'd put rule number nine, get your mind right, at the top of the list because it's a decision to step away from how you feel. Something that your spouse says makes you angry, and you respond in anger if you haven't got your mind in a position where, "I'm not going to take it

personally, I'm going to talk about what the issue is and step away from how I feel before I respond," because that just escalates the situation. So, you have to get your mind right. You have to decide, "I'm going to walk into this conversation with a goal towards resolving the dispute and I'm not going to get personal. I'm not going to get angry. I'm not going to get upset." Sometimes you do anyway.

But, if you make a decision about how you're going to respond before you just go in and start swinging, it helps you and it helps the other person. If you're business-like and you maintain a business-like manner, they'll tend to do it, as well. Not always, but they tend to respond in kind. So, I think that would be very important.

I think another one would be rule number seven, which is identify the dog that's barking. When you're unhappy, angry, upset, or frustrated, you tend to unload on the person nearest to you, or the easier target. Your boss has been awful all day long. You can't go and curse him out, but you can go and you see the trash is all... Then you get in it about the trash because she or he is a safe person to get mad to because you're committed to one another and he's right there, and he can't fire you, and all that kind of stuff.

So, if you identify the dog that's barking, when you pull up in that driveway, you say, "I had a horrible, horrible day at work, and I'm angry and I'm frustrated. I'm not going to blame my spouse for it. I know I'm irritated and I'm going to make a point of putting that away, or at least considering that before I allow myself to get upset about something that's going on in the house." If you say that out loud to yourself, you'd be surprised how much easier it is to conform to it.

I think the last one would be rule number 21, which is the turn signal requirement. I learned this one the hard way. I decided to change how I was going to do business at the house and I didn't tell my husband, and it was a terrible time. People change throughout the course of their life. If you're going to have an ongoing relationship several decades long, and you want to shift how you do or feel or do business, you can't just decide to do it without telling the other person, letting them know, "This is the kind of things I'm looking at. This is how I think it's going to affect you. I don't mean to do this, that, or the other to you, but I do need to do A, B and C."

Then they can tell you how it makes them feel and you can modify and adjust. But, you've got to tell people when you're changing your game plan. You can't just change. You've got to put your turn signal on when you're driving so everybody else knows where you're going. You have to put your turn signal on in your relationship so your spouse knows where you're going, as well.

Lee: Right. Those are three excellent choices, I think. There are a lot of good rules in that book. Your mother raised you right. I don't think anybody could go wrong by picking up a copy of "My Mother's Rules" and learning about all the rules there. Every bit of it is solid advice.

Judge, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today. Thank you so much.

Lynn: Thank you so much. I enjoyed it.

Lee: You guys ought to go and get a copy of the book, "My Mother's Rules". There's a second book, "Put It in Writing". You can find them both on Amazon. You can find them anywhere that excellent books are sold. We're going to put links to it on the show notes so that you can click on it and get straight to the book. You can find out more about Judge Lynn Toler at her website, [www.judgelynn.com](http://www.judgelynn.com), or you can just tune into Divorce Court.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We always love hearing from you. Keep your comments and feedback coming. You can reach our comment line at 919-256-3083. You can also email at us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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