

Lee: This is Episode Number 166 for Stay Happily Married: Ready to Spice Up Your Sex Life?

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.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Maybe you and your spouse started out having great sex. It might have been spontaneous, playful, energetic, and enjoyable but over the years, with hectic routines, kids to care for and careers to balance, your sex life has suffered. Are you having sex less often? When you do have sex is it routine and unimaginative? Has the romance and adventure slipped away as the years have gone by?

Many marriages suffer when sex becomes rote and predictable or just doesn't happen as often. Sexual intimacy is one of the best ways to maintain a healthy, happy marriage. Collette Segalla joins us to teach us about how to revitalize your sex life and improve your satisfaction with sex and with your marriage.

Collette is a psychologist with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. She has extensive training and experience working with people of all ages, with special training in the field of adult relationships. Collette, you've been with us before, I'm thrilled to welcome you back. Welcome back to the program.

Collette: Thank you, Lee. It's great to be back.

Lee: You have couples coming to you looking for advice and counseling. What are some of the most common complaints that you're hearing?

Collette: The most common complaints I hear have to do with issues around communication, challenges with partnering, and difficulties that arise when the relationship does not seem to be meeting expectations for happiness and fulfillment. Those are the most common ones I hear.

Lee: What about sex? How does that play into all of this?

Collette: Sex plays a role in all of these. Sex is like the glue that keeps the relationship together. There are many challenges to being in a marriage, but when a couple has a satisfying sex life together the challenges are a lot easier to manage. Sex is not the answer to everything, of course, but it's a really important ingredient to having a healthy and functional relationship.

Lee: I don't know, it might be the answer to everything.

Collette: That would be nice, wouldn't it?

Lee: Yeah. I'm just speaking from my perspective. Let me ask you, how often is sex an issue for the couples that you're treating? In what percentage of the cases does it come up? How frequent is it?

Collette:It is very frequent. It comes up really often. When a couple is struggling in their relationship, there's almost always some kind of issue with the sexual relationship. It's not always the primary issue that brings them into couples counseling, but it almost always surfaces as one of the areas the couple is having trouble with. So it's very common.

Lee:So it's one of those 'chicken or the egg' questions, I guess. Is the sex problem causing the other problems or are the other problems causing the sex problem? Is that sort of the way you look at it?

Collette:Exactly.

Lee:What about gender? I'm really curious about this. Are there certain complaints that husbands raise about sex and are there different complaints that wives raise? Is this a gender thing? Do they look at the whole sex issue from a different perspective?

Collette:They do. As you may have guessed, Lee, in couples work what I often see is that there's a difference in the level of interest in sex between men and women and a difference in what role sex plays in the relationship. Not always, but typically what I hear is that men would like to have sex more often. Women are usually interested in sex and would like a better sexual relationship with their husbands, but there are other factors involved that can deter women from having sex as often as their husbands would like.

Of course, this is generalization. There's also a difference in the role sex plays in the relationship. For men, they want to have sex in order to feel connected to their wives, while women want to feel connected before they have sex.

Lee:That leads to a lot of problems, I guess. If you're not feeling connected, the woman doesn't want to have sex and the guy is thinking this is the solution to the problem. And you end up with, 'it's not happening'.

Collette:That's right. That's why it's really important to just put it out on the table and for both partners to be aware of the differences between men and women, so they can figure out ways to work around them and work through them.

Lee:Do you see couples where the lack of a sexual relationship or some sort of sexual incompatibility ends up resulting in the marriage falling apart?

Collette:It really depends on the couple and how high they value sex in the relationship. Usually it's not the only issue that leads to it. It depends on how long the couple has been together and how much they have invested in the relationship.

Generally speaking, lack of sex or sexual compatibility can really be a serious problem. If it's a question of sexual compatibility, but there's a real interest in having a satisfying sexual relationship, the good news is that the two people can learn how to engage with one another in a way that's more compatible with the other.

Lee:Right.

Collette:Again, there has to be interest and a willingness to learn about the other person. When it's considered an acceptable area to explore with each other, it can actually make the relationship stronger. It's when people believe that this is automatically supposed to always be fantastic that sexual incompatibility presents more of a challenge.

Lee:Right. That makes a lot of sense. We were talking about this 'chicken or the egg' thing, but I would imagine that the non-sex issues are causing the sex issues more often than not. But do you see it where it's the other way? Can a lack of sex create issues in other parts of the relationship or in people's lives?

Collette:Yes, it can. Like you said, it is like the 'chicken or the egg' sort of thing. When there is a lack of sex in the marriage, usually that indicates some problem in another area, either for the couple or for one of the partners in the marriage.

When there is a healthy and intimate sexual relationship, usually couples have a much better connection with one another and they're more likely to work on problem areas such as communication or partnering issues. When there is no sex, the challenges that inevitably come up in the relationship are that much harder to deal with since there's not the intimate physical bond that's needed to meet those challenges.

On the other hand, though, in some marriages there's a wonderful friendship and partnership but the sex is lacking. If neither person has an issue with this there's no problem. When one of the partners isn't happy, then the couple will have issues to face. If both partners are unhappy, then the sexual relationship can be worked on and improved.

As far as whether it can create issues in one's personal life, it certainly can, since sexual intimacy and sexual expression are part of a healthy adult experience, an adult form of connection and communication. If there's no sex, if it's non-existent in a person's life, then there is probably a whole lot of life energy that's not being given a healthy outlet. That can lead to imbalances that affect other areas of a person's life.

Lee:Right. I assume most marriages start off pretty strong from a sexual compatibility standpoint. Things are probably on track or they probably wouldn't have ended up getting married. Assuming I'm right about that, what is it that causes the drop-off in sexual satisfaction? Where do things come off the rails?

Collette:Often what typically happens when two people get married and start a family is they get really busy completing everyday tasks. Keeping up with things takes priority over caring for the sexual relationship. Then maybe the couple falls into a routine. Sex just becomes less exciting and interest declines because when they do have sex it's not that great, or they just don't get around to it often enough.

Gradually over time it can fall lower and lower on the priority list without the couple even realizing it because they're so busy focused on other things. Other than that, sometimes a drop in a couple's sexual satisfaction comes from just staying with the

tried and true and getting a little too comfortable, and not continuing to explore with one another. That's where the real energy and creativity is needed to keep nurturing the sexual relationship.

Lee:Right. That's very interesting. I can certainly imagine when you're talking about long-term marriages, it's just that life takes over. What are the main indicators that you see of how happy a couple is with their sex life? What are you looking at?

Collette:It's really just how happy each person feels about it. It's entirely subjective. When a couple is happy, usually they feel free to explore. They enjoy their sex life. There's vitality, creativity and intimacy between them. Not just physical intimacy, but emotional intimacy during the physical act of sex.

Lee:Now this question strikes me as funny because it sounds like some sort of weird sex joke, but I'll ask it anyway. But I'm the only one allowed to giggle here. You're the professional. But seriously, in your opinion, what matters most in the sex life of a married couple? Is it more about quantity or is it about quality?

Collette:The obvious answer to that is quality, but what really matters most is what the couple values and enjoys the most. Not everybody is creative and curious about exploring. In that case, probably quantity is more important. Just have sex. Make that connection if that's right for that couple.

For others, the quality will really be important. Sometimes there can be a difference within the relationship as to which is more important, quality or quantity. Of course, that's something the couple will have to work out together.

Lee:I hear you. I have lots of jokes I can make about this, but I'm going to let them go in the interest of keeping our iTunes ratings. Let me ask you this. You're an expert on this; you've seen a lot of couples that are struggling with their sex lives and you've helped them solve the problem. They've gotten back on track. They don't get divorced. In fact, you're able to help them stay married and have a happier relationship.

What are you doing for them? How are you bringing romance back into their sex lives and helping them to keep it going strong, instead of the relationship spiraling out of control?

Collette:When they come to see me, a lot of it has to do with clearing some of the blockages that are there between the two of them. It has to do with having more understanding of one another and what kinds of things they're getting caught in, in their emotional relationship with one another. What kinds of things are barriers? When you get a little bit more clear about those things and there's more empathy and compassion for one another in the relationship, then the sexual relationship itself can be addressed more directly.

There are a lot of ways to bring the freshness and romance back to the marriage. The bottom line is that it requires interest and intent on the part of the couple. If these are firm, this frees the couple to try all kinds of different things in the bedroom to spice up their sex life. What's probably most freeing is when there's connection

and emotional intimacy between the partners. That's why it's so important to work out through talking in a therapy room what's going on between the two of them emotionally.

It can be looked at as cultivating the relationship both inside the bedroom and out. The couple needs to be able to enjoy one another, to have fun, and to trust one another. Then it's a matter of finding out what brings the most to the relationship. Some people like surprises. Some people like mystery. Some like drama and performance. Some like the exotic. It just depends. You have to try something new and something specifically designed to excite and satisfy the other person.

Lee:I was hoping you were going to say all you need to do is head down to Victoria's Secret and you're good to go.

Collette:If that would be exciting, then there you have it. That's a quick fix.

Lee:It does sound like we've got to come talk to you first. You're going to have to help us fix what's going on in our relationship before we do the trip to Victoria's Secret.

Collette:You could probably do them both at the same time. Maybe not in the same hour, but one doesn't have to wait for the other.

Lee:I have been to your office before and I know you're just down the block from one of those stores. I guess it's not Victoria's Secret. You're down the street from a couple of those stores, now that I think about it. I wonder if that's a coincidence.

Collette:Maybe not.

Lee:Maybe not. That's right. A partnership between the experts and the shops. That's amazing. We've covered a lot of ground today. We've talked about how to work on the relationship, how to deal with sex within the relationship and keep it going. What else do we need to know to keep our marriages on track and to keep our sex lives going the way we want them to go?

Collette:Probably the most important thing is that relationships really need to be nurtured and cared for, not just emotionally in the partnership, but also sexually. It's a matter of treating the relationship as something to be cared for and something that grows and changes over time. It's a matter of continually looking to find ways to bring energy and interest into the relationship between two people.

Lee:Terrific advice. You can't go wrong with that. Collette, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

Collette:You're very welcome, Lee.

Lee:You can find out more about Collette Segalla and her practice. She's with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Their website is at lepageassociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. It's L-E-P-A-G-E Associates.com. Lot's of good information at the site and bios of all the experts.

Collette's bio is there. You'll find out everything you need to know.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope you'll come back and join us again next week. In the meantime, if you have feedback we'd love to hear it. Our comment line is at 919-256-3083. You can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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