

Lee: This is Episode number 172 for Stay Happily Married: How to Live Happily Ever After.

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. Has your fairy tale marriage turned into a nightmare? Ripped from the pages of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice", we've been made to believe that happily ever after is possible. People spend years looking for their perfect partner, and come to find that all the spark and je ne sais quoi that had attracted them to their partners has now fizzled into an unhappy marriage.

Family therapist, Lesli Doares, doesn't believe in having only two choices: either remaining in a miserable marriage or getting a divorce. Lesli believes in happily ever afters. Lesli is a marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Cary, North Carolina. In her practice, Balanced Family Therapy, her focus is on helping couples build strong, secure relationships. It is her belief that marriage is a different kind of relationship, and with the proper tools and techniques most couples can have a happy and a successful relationship.

Lesli brings both her personal experience and professional training to her work with couples. Her passionate belief in marriage has led to the development of a five-step theoretical approach that Lesli detailed in her book, "Blueprint for a Lasting Marriage: How to Create Your Happily Ever After with More Intention and Less Work". Lesli and her husband Steve have been married for over 20 years and they have two children.

Lesli, welcome to the show.

Lesli: Thank you so much for having me, Lee.

Lee: You know, I really want to talk about what you're doing to help people live happily ever after, and I want to talk about your book. But before we jump into all that, let me just ask you: what is the most common issue that you are hearing in your practice from couples that are coming to see you, trying to seek help in their marriages?

Lesli: There tends to be three things which actually are all connected. They are varying levels of the same thing. One of the things people come in with is that they're having difficulty communicating well with each other. The second one is that they feel distant from their partner, that they've become more like roommates. Unfortunately, the third one that I get more frequently than I like is where

infidelity has occurred. They are all really the same level of just feeling disconnected from their partner.

Lee: Right. That's interesting. So I guess the affairs are just those cases that have gone to the extreme of feeling distant and having communication problems. You end up distant because you don't have much communication. Is that the way you see it?

Lesli: Yes.

Lee: That all makes sense. Let me ask you, if we're sitting at home and we're watching TV with our spouse, living a life, taking care of kids, doing everything we do, what's the thing we ought to be looking out for? What's that first warning sign that maybe our marriage is headed down the wrong path?

Lesli: Really, a good warning sign would be if you cannot remember the last time you and your partner were together as a couple. There is a theory that we need to be spending 15 hours of uninterrupted one-on-one time with our partners a week. That does not mean while we're sleeping. So if we're not actually spending time together as a couple, that is a really big warning sign that you really need to pay attention and do something different.

Lee: 15 hours a week? Wow. Especially if you have young kids, that just seems awfully challenging. Don't you think?

Lesli: It does, and that's usually the reaction that I get when I mention it. What I would say is try to make that a goal. Try to spend at least a half an hour to 45 minutes a day just in intimate, intense conversation with your partner. It takes at least 15 minutes to get past just the informational, "How was your day? What did the kids do?" What I consider just that informational type of conversation into, "How do you feel about the way the meeting went?" or, "What are your concerns about the children?", where you're getting into a deeper, more intimate conversation.

Lee: Right. Let me ask you, when you're looking at those couples where things really aren't working out, obviously those issues that you mentioned are the ones that jump off the page at you. Those are the things that people are identifying. But are there any particular trends or patterns that you see in those relationships that should make us worry?

Lesli: Yes, actually, there are. That's a really great question. The underlying connector is whether or not you feel resentment towards your partner. There are a lot of reasons why you might feel that way. It may be because you feel like your partner isn't taking the time to address your concerns or to spend quality time with you. Sometimes, it's because you've had an argument that hasn't been resolved. What it is, is that you start feeling anger and resentment towards your partner.

Lee: So when you feel that cropping up inside of you, you know you're in big trouble. That's a very interesting thing. I think all of us probably feel it a little bit sometimes, when something is coming off the rails. But you're saying if that's really becoming a pattern in your life, that is really the most important danger sign.

Lesli: It is absolutely the most important danger sign, because when something negative is happening, when something difficult is happening, it tends to take all of our focus. Then we forget to see what the positives might be. It sets us up to expect certain behaviors from our partner. So if we have the idea that, "My partner doesn't care about me," or whatever it might be, "My partner doesn't listen to me. They don't value my opinion," then that's going to be the lens that I'm going to see all their behavior through, which will then just exacerbate the anger and resentment. We just get into this negative feedback loop.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Let me ask you this; it's kind of out of left field here. I assume that love is an essential element to all successful marriages. That's the thing that jumps out at me. What other elements are there? What other pieces of the puzzle, aside from love, do you have to have in the mix if you are going to make this thing work?

Lesli: I think the biggest thing that you need to have, in addition to love, is a real commitment to making it work, because it's not always going to be smooth sailing. There are going to be some choppy waters. When we have children, as much as we might want them, those children take time and energy and effort. We only have 24 hours in a day, so if we're giving it to the kids, we might not necessarily have it to give to our partners. But if we're committed to see that through, then we know that we can come out on the other side.

It's also important to understand the reciprocity of relationships, that if I do things that make my partner feel good and loved and cared for, it increases the chance that my partner will do those things for me. That keeps us on the positive plane and keeps things above board. Keeping the love alive is really what it does, because we can actually kill love by our behavior, by not taking the time and making the effort to show our partner how important they are.

Lee: That's very good advice. Don't you feel like today it's awfully difficult to have a successful marriage? What is it about this time in life that makes it so difficult to make it work?

Lesli: There are a couple of challenges for a marriage today. One is our expectations. We have this expectation that it's always going to be wonderful and that unconditional love exists. No matter what I do, no matter how I behave, my partner is going to love me. In reality, as I was talking about in the previous question, that reciprocity comes into play. Love really isn't unconditional, but we

have this expectation that we're going to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. We actually have to behave in a way that makes that possible.

And so the expectation that, "I'm going to be happy all the time," really, really gets in the way. We also don't see successful marriages very often. We are on our second or third generation of divorces, and we have this idea that either the marriage is going to stay miserable, or we have to end it.

There is the third possibility of making it better. Again, you have to understand that sometimes you will be uncomfortable in your relationship as you're trying to make it better. This idea of constant happiness just isn't a realistic expectation for anything.

Lee: That makes sense. It's disappointing, but it makes sense. What about the book you wrote? You've got this book you put out, "Blueprint for a Lasting Marriage" and I love the rest of the title: "The Complete Guide to Building Your Happily Ever After". What motivated you to write the book?

Lesli: What really motivated me to write the book was seeing couples come in 10 years, 15 years, sometimes as long as 20 years, and they hadn't been happy for half that time. Mostly it's because there is no manual for how to marriage work. In fact, I talk about this client in the book where I was working with this great young couple, very positive, but struggling a little bit. She comes in one day and she says to me, "I had an epiphany." And I said, "Oh, great. What was it?" And she said, "Marriage isn't natural." And I just laughed and I said, "Where did you get the idea that it was?"

We have this idea that if we fall in love, we find the person we want to be with and we get married, then everything's going to be smooth sailing. In actuality, trying to get to people to live together successfully for a long period of time is a real challenge because you come from different places, you have different experiences, you have these different ideas about what makes life work.

What happens is you end up in a 'you versus me' kind of interaction, as opposed to what I propose in the book, creating a 'you plus'. It's you plus another person that has to be considered all the time. That can be a real challenge as you try to negotiate through those differences.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. We've talked before about tools that people use to make their marriage better and stronger. What are the tools that we're talking about? What are the three most important tools that people have?

Lesli: One of the biggest tools is just your mindset. I realize that doesn't really sound like a tool, but when you have your mind made up in one direction or another, then it pretty much influences what you pay attention to. So if my mindset is that

this relationship is going to succeed, I'm going to do what I need to do to make it succeed. Then we're already partially there.

Another tool that's really important is the ability to look at yourself and see what your part of the pattern is. When you can identify, "When I do this, this is the response I get from my partner that doesn't really make me very happy. Is there some other way for me to do that initial thing?" When we're a part of a couple, we actually do have a built-in scapegoat. If I just put it all in my partner's lap, then that lets me off the hook and I don't have to do anything. In reality, I have ownership in my behavior.

The third thing really is a tool, and that is how do we develop a productive way of communicating and working through these differences. That's actually something I teach my clients; how to do that well so that you don't end up fighting with your partner.

Lee: Good tools. I want to ask you this question, because I know you're dealing with this all the time. I'm sure you have scenarios where you have one spouse that comes in complaining about feeling distant and communication issues, etc., and you have the other spouse, probably the guy, who says everything is fine, it's all good. My laundry gets done, my dinner is on the table and life is pleasant. Why do we have to come here? What do you suggest for a couple where one is happy and the other one is like, "This is not all I want, this is not good enough for me?"

Lesli: That's a challenging question, and I do see it quite frequently. And it usually does play out the way you suggest, that it's generally the guy who thinks everything is okay, and it's the woman who tends to be a little bit unhappy, maybe with the way things are.

There are a couple of things I suggest. The first thing I tell people is that if one person isn't in a good place in the relationship, the relationship really isn't functioning well, because you have to have both people being okay with the relationship. That can be a hard adjustment for the person who says, "Hey, everything's fine in my life."

I ask them if they love your partner, and they say yes. Then I ask whether they recognize that their partner is struggling, and most of the time they'll agree that they recognize that. Then it's, "What do you want to do about it? What do you think is going to happen if your partner stays this way?" They'll figure out pretty quickly that it's not going to work out in the long run.

Then I look at the unhappy partner and I talk with them about whether their expectations are realistic. Is what they want out of the relationship something that is doable? If it is, great. Then we go into negotiations about how they can get more of that. A lot of times their partner doesn't really know exactly the behaviors that they could be doing that would make the unhappy partner feel better in the

relationship. They recognize they are unhappy, and there are a lot of statements about that, but they don't exactly know, "What would I be doing differently that would change this?" And that's really where I come in and help them out.

Lee: That makes perfect sense to me in terms of getting them back on track. If you've got a couple and things are just not working out, they come in with these classic issues; the communication issue, the feeling distant, potentially the affair issue which, like you said, comes up a lot, where do you start with that couple? What's the first step? How do they get back on track?

Lesli: The first is acknowledging that there are some serious issues going on. The only way to get back on track is to really figure out exactly where we are. Unfortunately, as I said before, what a lot of couples see is: "Either I have to stay in a bad marriage, which I don't really want, or I get divorced." What they don't necessarily recognize is that they might be going from the frying pan into the fire. They don't understand all the extra complications that a divorce might bring about.

When I work with couples, part of it is to find out what's working. Find out what has kept them together for however long they've been together, and then increase that behavior. Increase the focus on that. Sometimes it's as simple as recognizing a generous act that my partner did. It might be picking the kid up from school because I had an appointment, or it could be having dinner on the table when I come home at the end of a long day. Those aren't necessarily things we focus on when we feel like our partner doesn't love us. We're focusing on all the things that support our position and kind of ignore the things that don't.

So it's really helping the couples take a complete look at the relationship and not just on what's going wrong, and giving them hope that we can build on that.

Lee: Let me ask you the last couple of questions here. In your book, "Blueprint for a Lasting Marriage", if somebody is at this place that we're talking about right now, where they really are in trouble, they're struggling, is the book for them? You basically described it as the missing manual for marriage. Is it really more for somebody that's just getting into a marriage, or is it helpful to somebody that has already been married for years but things are just not going the way they want them to?

Lesli: That's a really good question. I would like to say both, but if I'm honest, it was really designed to help keep people out of trouble. If your marriage is okay, you're not really unhappy but it's maybe a little stale or you're starting to feel that distance, but the resentment level hasn't built up high, then yes. There are a lot of things in the book that can be helpful.

Part of the book talks about what I call the five common challenges to marriage, which would be children, intimacy, money, communication and input of friends

and family. There is a lot of practical information in that part of the book that can really help couples get back on track if they're not too far off the track. But if somebody has had an affair or there are some really entrenched positions, to be honest, the book by itself isn't going to help them because, "I'm not ready to do positive things for my partner without a guarantee that they are going to do positive things back for me."

It's a very difficult mindset to change if you're hurting. In that particular case, I'd recommend getting some outside help, getting some third party help with a therapist.

Lee: That doesn't surprise me. I do think once you've got that history, that track record that has put you into a difficult spot, no book is going to really solve the problem. You're going to need a lot more intervention there to get back on track. My own experience would say a book is great; it might be good preventative care, but you're going to need a lot more than that to get back on track once you're in trouble.

Lesli, we've covered a lot of ground today. I feel like you've given us all some good ideas on how to live happily ever after. Are there any other things you want to add, any other tips we need to hear, any other last bits of advice?

Lesli: Absolutely. The thing is that everybody who gets married wants it to work. Most of the time we're all just doing the best we know how. Nobody goes into this thinking, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to blow this up in ten years." So it's really being able to learn what works and how to do it right. As I said, that's a challenge that we all have because marriages go through varying stages. Sometimes, being married is tough. If we just know that we're in this together and that there are resources out there to help us, then we can ride it through.

Lee: Lesli, thank you so much for being with us on the show today.

Lesli: Thank you so much, Lee.

Lee: If you are interested in finding out more about Lesli and her practice, you can visit her website at balancedfamily.com, or you can call her office at 919-924-0463. If you want more information about Lesli's book, "Blueprint for a Lasting Marriage: How to Create Your Happily Ever After with More Intention, Less Work" visit the website, and this is a long one, it's blueprintforalastingmarriage.com. We'll put a link to that here in the show notes.

Thank you so much for being with us again this week. We really appreciate you listening in. We love your feedback and input. If you have any suggestions, any comments at all, you can reach us at our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married!

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