

Lee: This is Episode number 174 for Stay Happily Married.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. The current economic situation has placed a significant strain on wallets, on jobs, and most importantly, our relationships. Divorce rates are unsettling. [inaudible 0:14] and half of all marriages end in divorce.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: What is even more disturbing is that out of the couples getting divorced, about 80 percent of them attribute their failed marriage to arguments over money. While these statistics may seem daunting, there really is hope. There are ways that you can reduce the burden that financial difficulty places on a marriage. You can use some of the techniques we are going to talk about today to make your marriage have a much better chance of success.

Today I am here with Dr. Tina Lepage. Tina founded Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she specializes in helping couples and in doing marriage therapy. She helps rebuild marriages every single day. She has a Masters and a Doctorate in clinical psychology. She has an additional Masters in management. All of that should prove exceptionally helpful for today's topic.

Welcome back to the show, Tina. I am so glad you could join us.

Tina: Thanks. Nice to be back, Lee.

Lee: We're talking about money, and stress, and all of that. In the last decade, there really have just been more economic ups and downs than I think most people can even imagine. Who is that affecting, and exactly how is it affecting them? Who is taking the brunt of all this?

Tina: It's hard to really say any one group. I would say lots of people are taking the brunt of it. I think people feel pretty thankful who have their jobs and feel secure in their jobs and their income. Certainly, we know that there have been a lot of people who have been laid off, a lot of people who are out of work. Certainly, people who have had freezes in their raises, so they might still be employed but they are not seeing the same upward movement year-to-year that they would expect. There is just not as much job stability.

People are anxious. I think even if it doesn't affect you, it has usually affected someone in your family or a friend. College graduates are not feeling as certain that they are going to get out and get a job. Even people who are getting ready to retire are looking at their retirement funds, and those numbers have gone down. So I think a lot of people are feeling the financial strain.

Lee: You are stressing me out just talking about it.

Tina: Right, yes.

Lee: Every day we see the news on the TV and in the newspapers and all that. We know that the whole global economy is in a state of flux and it is not going in the right direction. How does all of that impact a couple?

Tina: I think the biggest thing is that it brings about this sense of uncertainty, which really brings on this enormous strain, because as a couple, and even as individuals, we really like to feel that we are in control of our life and in control of our future. In terms of economics and money, we like to plan things. Without that certainty, and feeling like you are not in control, that can certainly lead to being depressed and feeling very anxious. We are certainly seeing a lot of people coming in talking about being anxious about money. All of that, depression, anxiety, etc., can lead to a negative effect on people's mental health, which is what we see when they come in. Certainly, even their physical health, just their temperament is where it affects the family life. People lose their temper easily. It can even affect their parenting. It's just difficult day-to-day.

Lee: Wow. It is amazing, but I totally agree with you. Here we are listening to the news about things going on in Greece and Italy and around the world, and it's translating into our bodies here in the U.S. We're feeling it physically in our health and our mental health. What do you see people doing to cope with all of that?

Tina: Certainly, there are some healthy and some unhealthy ways to cope. Some of the unhealthy ways that we see, some of the worst things that we see, of course, are people turning to using more alcohol, smoking, maybe gambling, sometimes even having an affair because of that quick high or distraction. We see people who are sleep-deprived, who are worrying all the time, picking fights with their spouses, just, you know, being generally miserable. Those are, of course, the unhealthy ways that people are dealing with it.

There are, of course, much healthier ways to deal with stressful situations. Just relying on family and friends for support. Some people have EAPs through their work, so while therapy is not always an affordable thing for everybody in these types of situations, some people do have access to it. If you do not have access to it, there are support groups, church groups, sometimes lots of things online that are free.

So there are healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with stress.

Lee: Right. That's a good point. You do need to find affordable ways to deal with economic stress. You cannot often just add to the problem financially by spending the money on getting the help.

Tina: Sure. Yes, it is totally different than another type of stressful problem in good economic times when you might just say, "Oh, I am going to go to therapy."

Lee: Right. But on the other hand, if you still have your job, at least a lot of us have some sort of benefit, like you said, the EAP or even health insurance still covers it.

Tina: Exactly.

Lee: So that is a good thing. There are options. I think sometimes we are surprised that there are still ways to get help out there that we thought maybe had dried up

You know, we're talking about the whole world collapsing, and that is a relatively recent phenomenon. We laugh about it, but it really does feel like every day there are some new countries falling apart.

Tina: It does.

Lee: That's new. The world wasn't collapsing a year or maybe two or three years ago, and the economy was fine, but money was still a big problem in marriages. Financial stress on relationships is not unique to right now.

Tina: It's not new at all. In fact, it has just been a pretty steady statistic in terms of when people who get divorced or go through hard times are asked about, "Why did your marriage fail?" and upwards of 80 percent will say that finances were the primary thing that they had disputes over. That's a very high number, and that precedes these difficult economic times. It's a really big thing that couples argue about.

Lee: When you are just narrowing it down to the couple and you see the financial difficulties that they are experiencing, what are the most common issues or problems that you see couples trying to manage?

Tina: One of the really big things that we see is brought about by people just living beyond their means. In America, we are definitely not a good delayed gratification society. People buy a lot of things and at some point that catches up with them. So oftentimes there is this huge financial stress on couples at some point, because they

have bought, bought, bought, and they've got a huge amount of debt. That level of stress really weighs on people.

Some of these other things probably play into that. We also see that people have very different ideas about how to handle money, how to spend money, and how to save money. They oftentimes have very different financial goals because they come from different backgrounds in terms of different financial backgrounds and different thoughts in their own family as to the meaning of money and what to do with money.

Lee: That definitely rings true in my experience, watching so many couples and working with so many couples. When you have couples that have come to the marriage with different ideas about money, different backgrounds on money, all of which I think is so subtle and it is hard to talk about, because you do not even realize you have these perspectives that might be different, but what do you see people doing when they are getting into the stress of this, and they are realizing, "Hey, we don't see eye-to-eye." How do they try to deal with this stuff?

Tina: I think if you are at that point where you are realizing you do not see eye-to-eye, it is an important thing to just sit down and talk, and spend some time really listening to each other and hopefully, trying to listen to each other with sort of an open ear and empathic, and really wanting to hear where your spouse is coming from and what they are saying. Your spouse might actually have some good thoughts and ideas in there, and so not just rejecting outright that what they are saying is different from how I see things. Having that dialogue and trying to come up with some plan, approach, let's say, that works for both people, because ultimately, you are going to need to find an approach to money that works for both people, because money is just such a big part of our day-to-day lives, just in terms of how we take care of things, how we spend and how we save.

It does not mean that each person cannot have their own money that they spend their own way, but it just means that as a general approach, there needs to be a way to have an approach as a couple, respect each other, not get into the unhealthy things of trying to control each other, or one person then hiding what they spend. Those are some of the unhealthy things that just lead to a lot of stress, anxiety and fighting. So you want to stay away from those and try to come up with a healthier approach.

Lee: That makes sense, but that is a fairly high level. We're in the zone of the emotional discussion and I think that's good stuff. But when you zero down on now it's you and your spouse and the checkbook and the credit card bills, and you are actually having to deal with the nitty-gritty of, "This is what we've got and this is what we need to pay," what ideas do you have for people when it's down and dirty, we're right here on the front lines, and we've got to deal with the money now without getting a divorce?

Tina: Well, certainly, come to that discussion trying to be in the mindset of being patient. Be supportive. If you know this is a big issue, because we are giving it one label here and this is a continuum, so for some people, it's a prickly issue and it is a difficult issue, but that can go all the way to it is a bomb. If you a sense of where you are on that spectrum, if it is a bomb, you should probably have somebody else in the room, whether it is a therapist, a financial planner, or one of each at a different time, to get a sense of where that is for you. Because if it's a huge issue, it's going to be helpful to have somebody else in the room working with you on it.

If it's a prickly issue, you can probably come at it together on your own. Have that discussion ahead of time and know what your own issues are and what your own stress and preconceived notions are, and keep the idea that you are going to make a plan. Maybe in the beginning, you are going to sort of take baby steps and come to some compromises. I would say give each other a little bit of leeway. You do not have to compromise on everything, so some couples will say what is helpful, if they have really different ways of thinking about money, is to come up with a basic plan for things like future and retirement and day-to-day spending. But then there's a little bit of money that belongs to each of them that they just do what they want with, and the other person is not going to comment on it or judge about it.

I find that when people live within their means and do not have the stress of huge, huge debt, this goes so much better. So whatever the plan is that you are looking at, if you can both get on the page about that, it helps a great deal.

Lee: I am guessing for most of us here in America, your advice comes a little late.

Tina: Well, no. There's always time to do that. You can go to a financial planner. They are great at putting you on a debt-management plan. You get that under control, and then you go forward with that living within your means. It is not too late.

Lee: Right. No, I am with you. I was laughing because I was thinking, "Well, the financial stress in your marriage won't really be that bad if you don't owe any money." That would definitely help.

Tina: But there are people who do not owe tons of money that still argue over what they should spend their money on.

Lee: Well, that is true.

Tina: It is just that it is a lot easier. If you take that piece out, you have taken out a big part of the stress.

Lee: Right. If you do not owe any money, then you can find new things to argue about, and it will be so much easier. No, I am with you.

Tina: Less stressful things to argue about, yes. But seriously, this is not to say that people who are wealthy don't also say that 80 percent of them are fighting over money. It is a hot-button issue. It helps to have things paid off, but even in the light of having plenty of money, this is still something that people need to come together and try to understand each other. This is a team-player kind of thing when you are in a marriage so try to come up with a joint approach that feels comfortable for both people.

Lee: Good point. Have you had any experience with clients of yours going to some of these, I assume, inexpensive debt management types of services, credit-counseling services that you see offered in various places? Has that worked for any of your people?

Tina: Yes, I think it has. We know some good financial planners that we work with and refer people to. I think it can be very eye-opening and helpful. I will say even my husband and I will go to a financial planner once a year or every other year, and even going in with our stuff, sometimes they will pick up stuff that we have not noticed, like, "Oh, look, this loan has a high interest rate. What are you doing with that? Get rid of that one," and, you know, just stuff that you'd think we would notice, but we don't. Then we say, "Oh, OK. Great," and we follow through with it, and it saves us money. It's just that they have an eye for this stuff. That's their job, so I think they can be very helpful.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. I think we have got a lot of good points here in terms of helping folks deal with the financial stress and not have it cause their marriage to unravel. Any last tips before we go? Anything else that we have not covered today?

Tina: I would say just when you are approaching the topic, really get your thoughts in the mindset of not being judgmental of where your spouse is coming from, and not being too positively judgmental, let's say, of where you are coming from. That you are not necessarily right in your approach and your spouse is wrong. When you are feeling those tensions, you just really need to listen to each other and try to come up with something that is going to work for both of you. I think too many people just get really, really stuck. At least, that is what I see in the office. When people come in on this issue, they can get really, really stuck on the, "I have the right approach. You don't." kind of position.

Lee: Excellent advice. Tina, thank you so much for helping us out with this issue today. I really appreciate your being here.

Tina: Sure. Thanks for having me back, Lee.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Tina Lepage, you can visit her website, Lepage Associates. Let me spell that for you. It's Lepage, L-E-P-A-G-E, Associates.com That's the website address. Check that out. Lots of good information there. Or you can

reach their office at 919-572-0000. I'll put a link to LepageAssociates.com in the show notes for this program.

There is an article on the website at Lepage Associates that really is helpful, called "Managing Your Budget and Your Marriage: The Key to a Healthy Relationship." We'll put a link to that as well right in the show notes.

Thank you so much for being with us today. I am really glad you could join us. I'd love to hear from you. I'd love any feedback you have. Comments, criticisms, ideas about topics we ought to be covering. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

Announcer: 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'd 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.