

Lee: This is Episode Number 182 of Stay Happily Married: Mixing Money and Marriage.

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: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Ever find yourself at odds with your spouse about how to spend your hard-earned money? Although no one likes to admit to being materialistic, well, we sort of all are. How can we not be? Our whole society runs off of one thing, money. We need it to put a roof over our heads, to put food in our bodies, to function in the world we live in. With something like this playing such a huge role in our lives, it's bound to come up in our relationships.

Today, I'm here with Jessie Sell. She's a marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Durham, North Carolina. Jessie believes in using an interpersonal approach with her clients, meaning the better relationship between her and the client, the better the success. Over the last 12 years, Jessie has worked in a variety of settings including higher education and non-profit agencies. Now, she works with couples hoping to overcome issues in their relationships.

When Jessie isn't busy helping couples, she loves to make jewelry, go hiking and spend time with her 2-year-old son. Welcome to the show, Jessie. I'm so glad you could join us.

Jessie: Thanks Lee, it's good to be here this morning.

Lee: You know, I always like to put a face with a name, and I want to just mention your website as we get started. It's jessiesell.com, J-E-S-S-I-E-S-E-L-L.com, is that right?

Jessie: You got it.

Lee: I've looked at it and I think it's a great resource, and I know some folks like to look at it as they listen, so there you go. Listen, money, it is a big deal in relationships and I know that it can be a very sensitive, delicate thing in a lot of marriages. In your experience, how many couples are dealing with this? Is it everybody? Is it just some? What's the deal?

Jessie: No, you got it. It's all of that. Even if couples are coming in and it's not like the presenting issue per se that they're dealing with, it always comes up. A lot of the research is saying that it's usually the number one reason people get divorced, or they separate is that they just cannot negotiate the power imbalance that money brings in the relationship, so it's a big deal. It's a really big deal.

Lee: So, what are you seeing? You said power imbalance, explain that and tell me what problems you're commonly seeing with couples that are having money arguments, problems, that sort of thing?

Jessie: Right now with the economy, people are losing their jobs or they're having a hard time finding a job, I think that it naturally sort of impacts someone's self-esteem and their sense of worth and it stresses the family out. And so, I think that people become very reactive and feel probably, maybe that they're either contributing not enough or too much. People get very sensitive about it understandably, and with that said, people have different opinions about how much to spend on what. How much do we save? How much do we go out to eat? These issues become very heated, you know.

Lee: Right.

Jessie: Do we buy a flat screen TV or do we do a renovation on the house?

Lee: Oh, we definitely buy the flat screen.

Jessie: Right [laughs] If they disagree, it can get very heated and it's hard to negotiate when people have different values of how to spend and what to spend money on.

Lee: Right. Right. That makes sense. Well, in an ideal world should couples deal with money on an ad hoc basis as issues come up, as spending issues come up, or do they need some sort of larger philosophy or master plan for the money in the marriage?

Jessie: Well, I think that in my experience when people deal with it sort of as they go along, that's when people are more reactive and they're not as objective. I think that it's one of those interesting things that people don't like to talk about money. There's a lot of shame involved. People's experiences growing up sort of comes up for them. People that have grown up with not a lot of money, there's a lot of shame involved.

So, I think a lot of people don't want to talk about it, or in relationships people don't want to talk about bad experiences that they've had or bad decisions that they've made and fear that their new partner is going to judge them about whether they've been responsible or not responsible. Or what that means about their character or what their partner is going to feel about their ability to be financially responsible in the marriage. In doing that, they avoid a topic that definitely needs to be talked about. I say that it needs to be talked about openly and honestly in the very beginning, absolutely in the beginning.

Lee: Right. It makes a lot of sense to come into it with some sort of agreements upfront. Spending is one thing, but what about saving? I would imagine that that becomes a big issue. Where one spouse has these ideas about having some sort of a cushion for savings and the other person really does want that big flat panel TV. Do you get into savings disputes with your people?

Jessie: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think the bottom line is that some people see the savings cushion, so to speak, as a sense of security, a safety net, something that's going to help them feel less scared in the future if something were to happen. The other spouse might not feel like that's important. And so, the safety net of the cushion, so to speak,

really helps people reduce their fears and when the other partner doesn't see that, they feel not understood.

It becomes more about the dollar figures, but really what's underneath of it is those fears, the emotions behind what the dollar symbols mean for that person. It does become a source of conflict, absolutely.

Lee: Yeah, that's fascinating. There's so much emotion in all of this. So, we've got the spending issues, we've got the savings issues, what I'm also wondering is what is the impact of one spouse coming into the marriage with some significant financial issues already, like they've got a big student loan already that they've incurred. Or they're in the marriage and they're debating one of them going back to school and incurring big student loans. Do you see issues like that that even go beyond the spending and savings issues?

Jessie: Again, it's one of those things where people don't want to talk about it when they get together. They start dating and they sort of withhold this information. Then, they find out that their partner has all these credit card bills, or we see a lot of couples not talking about custody agreements in terms of alimony, child support, those things.

Those things definitely need to be talked about in the very beginning, and it's interesting that some couples feel very differently about it. Some people feel like this is my debt, this is what I'm bringing into the relationship, where some couples feel like this is our debt, and so those things need to be negotiated.

Do you incorporate that into the overall budget? Is it the responsibility for the couple to take care of those debts? So, all those things need to be talked about and people feel very differently about it. One person might feel like, these are my student loans, this should be our debt, and one spouse could feel like, no those are decisions that you made before our relationship and you need to take care of it. People can get very offended and hurt and feel very stressed assuming all of that responsibility. It's tough.

Lee: Right. Now if I were listening to this program, I would be getting really depressed because we've identified a lot of things, just land mines that people can step on that really do turn into big issues.

Jessie: Absolutely.

Lee: You've got the spending, you've got the savings, you've got all these debt issues, pre and post marriage, but I want to ask you about one more thing because you alluded to it earlier. What about this situation where one spouse does make a lot more than the other? Maybe, you've got a traditional sort of marriage where one spouse is the big breadwinner, the other is maybe staying at home with kids or just doesn't earn that much. Or you have this unemployment situation where somebody lost their job and now you've got one spouse making a lot more money. What is the impact? Does that work or do we need spouses to make about the same in our culture now for the marriage to work? What's the deal?

Jessie: It's pretty impossible to have that expectation that both partners are going to make the same. In an ideal world, both people would be contributing. That brings up the issue of do people value someone staying at home raising the kids? That's a really tough job. When someone makes more money in the relationship, what tends to happen is that person feels that they can make more choices about how to spend money. They can tend to feel like they can go and do more things with their money and it can really be very damaging.

What we've seen work is people being able to contribute into the household budget and then have their own sort of spending and savings where they feel equally as empowered because people can use it as a tool to hurt the other person and sort of withhold. You have this allowance and this is what you can spend and I make the money and it's really tough. It's really tough.

Lee: Wow. It's fascinating. I really do feel like if you've been listening to us for the last 15 minutes, you are now really worried about your relationship. Either money is already impacting it, or money will be impacting it. You have convinced me. What are you seeing people do to solve these issues in their marriage? What are the sort of self-help approaches that you see people doing before they come into you, and I want to know if some of those are working or if they're not working, so we can maybe save people some time.

Jessie: Well, they're not addressing it is part of the problem or they're avoiding the topic. I think that people feel like if they just sit down and just do a budget, everything is going to be fine, but they're not addressing the emotional component about the values of money, their fears, their worries about their future. What they want their life to look like.

So sitting down and doing a budget is one piece of the puzzle that can be helpful, so I think that a lot of people try that and then they're like, well it's not working. Well, it's not working because of the emotional component, how people value money, all of those things that I've talked about aren't addressed and that's why the budget. Doing a traditional sort of approach to dealing with this isn't working.

Lee: Right. They're dealing with the symptoms, but not necessarily the underlying emotional piece of it. How do you help them with that? Somebody shows up in your office, it's obvious that one of the big issues is money in one of these various forms or fashions that the issue comes up. What do you do to get them through that and get them back on track?

Jessie: Right. Well, I try to get them to see it's not really about the number, it's about the reactions, the triggers to money, and really how does money make them feel about themselves? How does money show up, like talking about the values, how people were raised, how their parents made decisions about money. Did they grow up with a lot of money? Without a lot of money? Were their basic needs met?

What we do see is that some people can have very traumatic responses in the here and now if they grew up in poverty. We're seeing people have PTSD sort of responses to growing up in poverty, so those things need to be addressed and talked about, and both people need to be heard and honored. It's not about one person is right or wrong. Coming up with some sort of way to negotiate and to be heard.

Lee: Right. That makes sense. Do you recommend practical solutions beyond the emotional issues? Are there systems or techniques that you get people to employ in their relationships that are less about digging in under the hood but more about just sort of . . .

Jessie: Sure.

Lee: Well, what do you do?

Jessie: Absolutely, and that is one component, but then some people actually need the tools. OK, well we understand the emotions behind it, we understand the triggers that give me some practical things to do.

Lee: Right.

Jessie: And what I encourage people to do is look at three months how they're spending money. What are those household shared responsibilities, things that we have to pay, what are those individual things, how much do you want to save? Kind of track that for a few months and then come up with a system of, these are the things that we need to pay, let's contribute X amount, these are the things that I need to pay personally.

What I've seen work is people having a joint checking, a joint savings and their own checking and their own savings. That tends to be a system that kind of works and talking with couples about what that looks like and how they can implement a system where people feel that it's pretty equal is helpful.

Lee: Right.

Jessie: But sitting down and doing a traditional budget, it can work doing some sort of checks and balances, but people need to know what's coming in and what's going out and tracking that for about three months to really give a more accurate sort of picture of what's going on.

Lee: Right. Right. All good advice. It makes a lot of sense to me. Jessie, I really appreciate you taking the time to walk us through these issues. As you indicated from the beginning, this is the issue that I think impacts every marriage. There may be other problems in the marriage, but money is going to impact every marriage in one way or another and you've been very generous with your time to talk us through that. Thank you very much.

Jessie: Thanks, Lee.

Lee: Jessie, thank you so much for taking the time and being with us today on the show. To find out more about Jessie Sell you can visit her website at www.jessiesell.com, that's J-E-S-S-I-E-S-E-L-L.com or you can call her office at 919-225-3478. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you will join us again next week.

We always love your feedback. We love hearing from you. You can reach us on 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.

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 would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.