

Lee: This is Episode Number 194 of Stay Happily Married: OMG! I Sound Just Like My Mother!

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.

Can a parent's advice save your marriage? We've feared this day. We thought our chances of escaping this doomed fate were better than average, but it's finally happened. We've finally realized that we've turned into our parents.

Leslie Petruk, author of the website OMG I Sound Just Like My Mother, is going to join us today. Leslie is a licensed counselor who's been in practice for 15 years. She has specialized training in both marriage and family therapy and is currently the founder and owner of Stepping Stones Counseling and Consulting, a private practice counseling center in Charlotte, North Carolina.

With a team of five therapists, Leslie and her practice work to provide collaborative counseling services for children, teens, adults, couples and families. Stepping Stones is even hosting a women's self-discovery group on May 3rd.

Leslie, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could join us.

Leslie: Thanks for having me.

Lee: It's really a scary realization when you're sitting there talking to your spouse one day and you say something that sounds familiar, almost too familiar, because you realize what you're saying is exactly what your mother or your father would have said in the same situation. Is it just me or does that happen to everybody?

Leslie: I think it happens to a lot of us. We're all products of our environment and it's not uncommon to hear something coming out of your mouth and then to think, "Oh, my gosh! I sound just like my mother or my father," once something rolls off your tongue. That's not an uncommon phenomenon.

Lee: I like to tell my wife that she's turning into her mother, but I don't like to think it about myself. Where does this come from? There's that nature versus nurture debate all the time. What's the root of this?

Leslie: We're all a product of our environment, and attachment theory talks about how there are imprints that happen. Literally, the research is talking now

about from the time we are in utero we are being imprinted and feeling the effects of our environment. The environment we are in is impacting us from the time we're conceived.

Based on the environment you're growing up in and the messages you're receiving, and the patterns and the way of living and communicating, and the relationships that are modeled for you, that is where a child is learning how to interact and how to be and so certainly that is what they're being taught. That's why as we get older we begin to see ourselves repeating those patterns, because it's what has been imprinted as we were growing up.

Lee: Obviously, this is much deeper than just saying the things that our parents said when they were interacting with one another. This is all about how we relate to one another. What's frightening to me, I guess, is that it seems like we can repeat all of the bad habits of our parents; that they're just built into us. Is that where we're going?

Leslie: That's certainly part of it. There's almost this natural magnetic pole to recreate what you were exposed to in your own environment. That is a natural tendency that we all have, to create where we came from and what we were taught. It's about becoming aware of those patterns and being conscious about them.

The good news is that we all have the ability to make a conscious decision and say that this is a value, a trait, a characteristic or a way of relating in my family that I did not like and that I do not want to repeat. There are ways to change that but you have to be very conscious about it and deal with the impact that it had on you in order to do it differently in your own family and your own relationships.

Lee: Is it necessarily bad if our patterns mimic those of our parents? Is that all bad news for us?

Leslie: Certainly not. We take the good, bad, ugly and pretty. I'm sure every family has its good and bad, and some of the things that we bring to our families that we took from our own families are probably valuable and good, so absolutely not.

I'm sure there are valuable things that we bring with us. It's a matter of just being aware of the things that you value from your own family of origin and those things that you maybe want to change or do differently. It's being conscious about it and making intentional decisions about those things that's important.

Lee: That makes me wonder. What are some of the more common elements that you see people carrying with them from their parents' relationships that are impacting their present relationships?

Leslie: A lot of it is about communication styles. One spouse may have had a certain way of dealing with conflict or communication that wasn't necessarily healthy or effective. That tends to create conflict in their marriage or disagreements about how to rear their children. If they were raised in a particular way, a parent might say, "Well, I turned out fine and this is how I was raised," and another parent might say, "But I don't agree with that. I don't think that's necessarily the best way to go about it."

A lot of it is stemming around communication and how you relate and how that impacted you, and then how do you want to do that in your own relationships in their own family.

Lee: Right. If you were watching them, I guess that's mostly what you learned and what you know from your experience. I suppose it's inevitable.

Leslie: Absolutely.

Lee: Do you find that people harp on issues to their spouses that were issues for them as children, the issues that their parents were dealing with during their marriage? For example, in my marriage today, would you be surprised to hear me going on about things that I heard my parents going on about with each other? Do we carry those complaints forward?

Leslie: Oh, sure. Absolutely. That's very common. It's almost this unconscious process that happens. I had a client yesterday who was saying, "You know, my mom did this and now I find myself doing the same thing." Absolutely, that's extremely common.

Lee: It's a little depressing, but I guess you're going to tell us how to fix it so I'm holding out hope for that. Seriously, no one really wants to hear themselves reliving their parents' lives, I don't think.

What I'm wondering now is when the marriage wasn't working out for the parents, if their marriage ended in divorce and the kids watched that, and now the kids are grown and in their own marriages, do you see the kids acting out? Does that make it harder for them to stay married, and are they replicating those behaviors that ended their parents' marriages?

Leslie: They are at risk for replaying those same dynamics, so the answer to your question is yes. We all tend to replay the dynamics that we learned in our family because as we are growing up in our family, it's like we are in school for life. That's our education for how to live.

We're being taught by our parents. Everything we're seeing and watching in terms of relationships and how to interact are being demonstrated. Sometimes parents say one thing but do another. As a parent, one important thing to be aware of is whether you are walking in the walk or just talking the talk. What we do is much more impactful on our children than what we say. They are watching us in our relationship and we are teaching them about marriage as we live out our own marriage every day. That is absolutely an influence on our kids. They are learning from us.

Lee: Now you're injecting another layer into this thing. Not only do we have to figure out what's going on with us in terms of the way we're repeating the patterns of our parents, but on top of that we've got to worry about what we're teaching our kids and how this is going to impact their relationships. This is kind of a nightmare, Leslie.

Leslie: Being a parent and being in a relationship is not an easy thing. It's a challenging thing for sure.

Lee: I'm ready to check out on that. This all is slightly overwhelming. If you're thinking about all of this, and I am, and you're thinking about your parents' patterns, and things didn't go well for them, obviously you don't want to repeat those patterns. That's got to create so much fear and anxiety that you're worried about repeating those patterns that it screws up your relationship.

Leslie: I think the most important thing that you talked about was the fear and anxiety. A lot of people tend to either go into a state of denial or they don't recognize the impact that their own upbringing has had on them. That's when you unconsciously recreate the same thing.

It's all about awareness and understanding how your upbringing influenced and impacted you, and the feelings that you have around it, that will keep you from repeating the same pattern. That's what's going to give you power over it.

Lee: So the more aware you are of those patterns that are inside of you, the more you're able to deal with them. That makes a lot of sense for me. Tell me about what you do for couples. If a couple decides they don't want to be their parents, they want to be their own people and want their own relationship on their own terms, what does that couple do in order to work in that direction?

Leslie: Most couples don't come into my office when things are going well. They've usually hit the place where things are not going so well and they're pointing their finger at the other person. The first thing is helping

them to realize that it isn't about fixing your spouse or blaming your spouse. It's about looking within and understanding that you are 50 percent of the problem and that you have to look within and own your part of the problem. That's probably the first and biggest hurdle to overcome and the first step in getting past not repeating the patterns.

They're probably repeating a lot of the patterns from their family of origin. A lot of times that's what's already happening by the time they come into my office. Beginning to look at yourself and to see that you're contributing to this problem and that you need to look within and not point the finger and blame. "I'm getting triggered by my spouse and I need to own that," and then helping them to really look within and look at their own wounds and the parts of themselves that carry the wounds of their childhood, the experiences that they've had that are getting triggered by their spouse.

Instead of relying on their spouse for their happiness and to be their savior and to fix them and to make them happy, they need begin to look within for that happiness and rely on themselves, but also recognize the parts of themselves that are hurting and need some compassion and connection within. Also, to be able to communicate in a way that isn't attacking or blaming their spouse but is owning.

In other words, what it might look like is, "There's a part of me that feels really hurt when you come home and you ignore me when you walk in the door." That's much different than saying, "You ignore me when you walk in the door," so communicating in a way that's more effective and not attacking, and then also having clients look within and understanding the parts of them that are getting triggered and hurt by their partner, and helping them understand how that relates to their own history.

Lee: I assume that guiding people in doing that on a weekly basis is literally a big part of what you and the experts in your practice are doing, because if we're coming in already with problems, it doesn't sound like we're going to be able to do that easily on our own. Am I thinking clearly on this one?

Leslie: Right. Yes, absolutely.

Lee: So you're in the trenches. What I'm wondering is if we do that, if we work on communications and we've got a lot of those patterns deeply imbedded in us that come from way back in our childhood, but we're committed and we really are working on the communication and we're working with someone like you on keeping it going, does it work? Does it resolve the problem? Do we save the relationship?

Leslie: If you're committed. That's the question. How committed are you to letting go of the blame and pointing the finger at your spouse and looking within?

I will say that the times that it's not successful is when one or both spouses are too entrenched in the blame game. When you're truly committed at looking at yourself and looking within, then it's very successful. But when you get stuck in the blame game, that is absolutely prohibitive for making progress.

Lee: It sounds like you're optimistic. If somebody is really committed then they're going to be able to pull it off, but it doesn't sound like there's anything easy about all of this. We come with a lot of history that's challenging to overcome, but it sounds doable.

Lee: We've covered a lot of ground today. Any last words of wisdom or advice for folks that are listening in?

Leslie: I guess I would just say that I think our culture really promotes the idea that when we get married or we find a partner, that person is going to fulfill us and make us happy. What I really teach and work with couples on is that this person is someone who should enhance your life and who should be an addition to, but that it's important that you connect with yourself and that you find the compassion and the connection within yourself to feel good and complete.

If you're looking for a partner to complete you, you're setting them up and your relationship up for doom. You have to find that connection within yourself first. We all tend to enter relationships with that idealized romanticized idea that this person is going to complete me and be my knight in shining armor and make me happy. There's that honeymoon period, and then we all fall into our old patterns and we ultimately realize, "This person isn't as great as I thought they were." You begin to see typical patterns start to play out.

That doesn't mean the relationship can't succeed. It just means that you have to work on it. I guess that's the message of hope that I want to send out. I think our culture tends to say, "Well, I'll just move on to the next one, because I want that feeling of excitement and love," but that always wears off. There's a level of commitment and work that always has to go into a long-lasting relationship. There's always going to be that point where you have to work through and learn how to find and keep the romance and connection going because relationships always ebb and flow. That would just be my message of hope.

Lee: Great advice. That is a good message of hope and I appreciate it. Leslie, thank you so much for being with us on the show today. Thank you for taking the time.

Leslie: Thanks for having me.

Lee: To find out more about Leslie Petruk and Stepping Stones Counseling and Consulting, visit their website at steppingstonesnc.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their office by phone at 704-335-6100. If you'd like more information on today's topic, visit Leslie's site at omgisoundjustlikemymother.com.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, we love hearing from you. You can reach us in a couple of ways. You can call 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 e-mail us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com, or call us at 919-256-3083.

Until next time, best wishes.