

Lee: This is Episode Number 195 of Stay Happily Married: A Crash Course in Marriage.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates and 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. Is your marriage getting the help and attention it needs to defeat the divorce odds? It seems that divorce is everywhere you turn. With the divorce rate hovering around 50%, there have been entire industries and communities built to help people going through this transition. This year, there's even a Divorce Expo in New York City. What about the expos for promoting marriage and making your relationship work?

Dr. Don Azevedo left graduate school with a strong desire to strengthen marriages and families. He received his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Tennessee. Don's work has taken him to a variety of locations, from war zones in Desert Storm to corporate settings, to hospitals and finally to private practice. Don is the Director of 3-C Family Services in Cary, North Carolina, where he provides help to individuals, couples and families.

Welcome to the show, Don. I'm so glad you could join us.

Don: Thank you, Lee. I'm glad to be here.

Lee: Well, today we're going to give a crash course in marriage. I'm excited about that. I'm sure that you and probably most folks could go on with a long list of the reasons for why it's hard to stay married. The divorce rates show us that it's obviously hard. What is it that you're seeing with married couples that seems concerning and destructive and that you think is contributing to this high divorce rate that we're seeing?

Don: Well, the big picture solution, or the big picture answer, to that is upside down priorities. The more detailed answer to that has to do with how people set their priorities. Since about the 1960s, folks have been putting children first, which is the big shift in marriage. Instead of saying, "The first thing is the individual. I'm involved in every relationship there is in my life and if I don't take care of me, there are no relationships, And then, if I don't take care the marriage, there is no family, and so the kids really aren't our priority because they're not getting the best that they can get."

Lee: Interesting, so you think like this whole kid focus has really contributed to the divorce rate going up over time, huh?

Don: Absolutely.

Lee: That's very interesting. So, the fallout of that, from a practical standpoint, when you put the kids first in that way, what happens, what's going on in the marriage?

Don: So, what happens in the marriage? We're already putting a lot of hours into work because we need to survive and things have gotten more expensive, and now we need two incomes to survive at the level we think we need to survive. Then, we put kids first, and we think that children need all of these enrichment activities of music lessons and sports and a variety of things, which are all good for kids, not necessary, though, if it's going to cost the marriage of their parents. Then, the very last thing that we put is time to spend with our partner, understanding who they are and who they're becoming.

Lee: Absolutely. Upside down priorities. That's fascinating. I do think what you're saying does make a lot of sense. I never thought of it that way, but this focus on kids really does flip our priorities upside down. Like you're saying, if the kids end up with divorced parents, that focus was really out of whack, because it ends up not helping the kids at all.

What goes on in the relationship when you have these upside down priorities? What's the emotional impact of all of that on the parents, on the couple that are in the relationship?

Don: The greatest impact is an increasing sense of loneliness, being surrounded by people but feeling innately alone.

Lee: Yeah. Yeah. Boy, I tell you, I hear that loud and clear, surrounded by people but feeling alone. What other kinds of reactions other than the loneliness?

Don: As the loneliness grows, there's this behavioral impact. We stop acknowledging one another. As a husband, with my wife and I'm working hard, I come home. I'm exhausted. Now, I've got to help the kids with homework, or there are things to do around the house, or my spouse is helping them with homework or doing things around the house. And I'm sitting there going, "Well, what do I do next?"

So, I pick up some hobby or I start doing chores and we're passing one another and, where before early in the marriage, when we passed one another, we might have reached out to touch or to say hello or to say something nice. Now, we pass by one another on opposite sides of the hall. We don't touch. We don't even look at one another. We don't acknowledge one another's presence. Now, that loneliness grows to a sense of resentment, and you're not actually sure what you resent. So, what's the easy target? I can't resent my children, so I have to resent my wife or my husband.

Lee: Do you think this is where . . . I mean, I rarely talk to anybody in a marriage that's going poorly, where there's not an affair going on, by one spouse or the other. Are we connecting the dots to affairs all the way back to this upside down priority thing?

Don: Absolutely. One of the things that happens is as loneliness begins to grow in the relationship and is not addressed, and the individual doesn't take personal responsibility for it, but puts it off on the other person or on life in general, they become vulnerable. They're vulnerable to someone who will show some attention and some level of attention to them.

At work, what happens is we're working on a project. We're very successful at it. We're focused on accomplishing a task together. So, there's this sense of camaraderie. There's this sense of energy. There is this sense of success. Then, I start sharing something emotional with you, or you start sharing something emotional with me. I understand you, and you understand me. Because we're having success in accomplishing things, I want to understand you and you want to understand me. Here is the birth of an affair.

Lee: Fascinating. So, what do you do about it? I mean, you've got these upside down priorities. I'm curious. I want to get into this from a global standpoint about how we should be doing it, but then I want to know how you fix it, once it's already kind of screwed up. Let's start there. What's the solution to this whole thing? Where do you go?

Don: Well, you come to 3-C Family Services. There's a solution.

Lee: No. I hear you. A counselor makes a difference. Yeah.

Don: Yeah. A counselor makes a difference, learning some skills makes a difference, but, really, what makes the biggest difference of all is taking personal responsibility for the outcomes you're having in your life, right this moment. By personal responsibility, what I mean is as an individual, I own all of the outcomes I'm getting in my life. So, if I'm lonely, it's because I'm not engaging in behaviors that are drawing others toward me. If I'm overworked, it's because I'm saying yes to too many things and I don't know what's important to me.

So, if I'm struggling in my marriage and I feel alienated from my wife, I need to go to her and say, "I want something different. Here's what's happening for me." If my wife doesn't understand, my job then becomes to understand her. This is where most marriages fall apart. They reach out and they want to be understood, one partner or the other, but they don't take the time to really understand what's going on for their partner because they want to be understood first. So, it goes back to Stephen Covey and first listen, to understand, and then speak, to be understood.

Lee: So, realistically, and you've alluded to this, we are on overload. We've got a million things going on. We're driving kids to every sporting event, dance class, you name it. And I agree with you, the priorities are turned upside down, but how do you find the time to focus on your relationships, to seek to understand? You've got to have the hours and time to listen, to learn that stuff about your spouse. Where do you get it, once you're living this lifestyle we're talking about?

Don: Well, you don't need hours, you need 15 minutes, but you need 15 minutes every single day. So, it's a matter of creating priority time with your partner, not the last time that you have in your day, whatever's left over, whatever the dregs are at the bottom of your energy barrel, but the very first and best time that you have, you dedicate to your marriage. You only need 15 minutes and, honestly, if you do this every day, it really is only 15 minutes. You check in to see what's going on, to plan. That's all you need to do in those minutes.

Lee: What do you do with those 15 minutes? How do you use them in order to get the most bang for your buck?

Don: Well, a wonderful concept about marriages and relationships, Virginia Satir created something called the "Daily Temperature Reading". It's like taking a temperature of the relationship and of your partner. It begins with appreciations, noticing a behavior that your partner has done in the last 24 hours, that let you feel loved or connected or thought of, and appreciating that to your partner.

The next step is new information. These are just the headlines. This is what's going on in our family, and this is what's going on with me. Again, that's only about 90 seconds, for each person.

The third one is questions, puzzles. These are things like, "What's happening next" or, "I heard you talk about something last week, but I haven't heard a follow-up about it," just looking for new information about stuff, if there is anything there, and you may not always have questions every day.

The fourth one is the most difficult. It's complaints with request for change. Now, this is not a problem solving step, it's just a confiding step about things that are going on in the relationship that are bothering you, like, "I notice that every time you walk in the house, you take off your shoes and leave them in the middle of the floor. What I would prefer is that you put them in the closet or take them off upstairs or not leave them in the middle of the living area." It's just a confiding step and you may not have a complaint every day either. That may only come up once a month.

Then, the last one and to me, one of the most important steps, is hopes, wishes and dreams. This is thinking about you and your partner some time in the future doing something together that is pleasurable and connecting, for the two of you. It can be as simple as, "Boy, I hope when we get through this week, on Friday evening, we can hang out in the hammock on the porch and just relax together or have a glass of wine together," or whatever it is that's pleasing to that couple, all the way to looking forward to a huge vacation. I just came off of a weeklong vacation in Las Vegas with my wife, and that was something I looked forward to for about three months. That looking forward is what gives a sense of connection and hope to a relationship.

Lee: Right. Right. That's great advice and very practical. but what do you do if you'd like to get into this pattern, you want to spend those 15 minutes and hope you can turn things around, but your spouse looks at you and says, "I don't have time for this. I'm too busy." You've turned your priorities around but they haven't turned theirs around. What do you do?

Don: Well, there's where you take responsibility to understand what's going on for them. What is the meaning of their life? What are they trying to accomplish? When they say they're too busy to spend time in the relationship, what does that mean and don't assume

the worst. I get a lot of women who are frustrated with their men, and this is a typical pattern. It doesn't always go in this direction. But, a lot of women frustrated with their men who are saying, "I've got to work more hours at work. I've got all the rest of this stuff," and the men are under the false belief that they have to provide at a level of income that the wife actually isn't asking for and would not want in exchange for the death of their marriage, but the guy's thinking that. Until the woman understands that, that issue can't be resolved.

So, seeking to understand, first, what's going on with your partner is the pathway to getting them to say, "Hey, I need to change my priorities, too and the marriage is more important than whatever it is they're substituting as number one."

Lee: OK. OK. Good advice. You know, in your suggestions about the things that you focus on or that you talk about, there's this . . . I can't recall the exact words you used, but basically you're providing your spouse with room for improvement. You're giving some criticism at some level, and what I'm wondering is, doesn't that kind of backfire for a lot of couples? Doesn't that sort of set off things in the wrong direction?

Don: It can. For instance, if I come in and take my shoes off and leave them in the middle of the floor and then you complain about it, I can get defensive about that and say, "Why are you bugging me about my shoes when I do XYZ for you and the family and the rest of this?" It really depends on how you and your spouse interact. If you bring up that particular topic and pick a small thing, and they come back with a very defensive response, then you know that you need help. This conversation is not going to go well all by itself or just with the two of you.

Now, if the person comes back and says, "Why are you picking on me about this?" and you're able to explain, "It's not that I'm picking on you. I'm letting you know that this is the effect that it has on me," you still have lots of choices about what you'd like to do with your behavior. And then, the person can then think about, "Well, what do I want to do with my behavior? Do I want to do things that make my partner frustrated, angry or distant, or do I want to change that behavior?" Then the two of you might be able to change it yourselves because both people are a little bit open to the idea of . . . Any two people who live together will engage in behaviors that are annoying to the other, period.

Lee: Right. So, somebody who's listening to us and who has made it this far, I think, is committed to taking those 15 minutes and utilizing your approach. What tips have you got for that listener? What are the most important things for them to be thinking about as they go home tonight and they want to get this thing started?

Don: OK. There are five attitudes that I recognized that differentiates successful couples from unsuccessful couples, in marital therapy. These five attitudes really help successful discussions occur between partners. The first is willingness. You have to be willing to engage in a conversation and to hear things that perhaps are not comfortable for you about how you act in the world or what effect you have in the world, when you act that way. So, the willingness to engage in the process is the number one attitude you need.

The second is priority time. I mentioned this before, the idea that we're giving the best of our time to our partner, not the dregs of our time to our partner.

The third is positive intent. One of the things that would save more marriages, more rapidly, is paying attention to every word you say and every action you do with your partner. Are they uplifting? You can complain to a partner in an uplifting way, or you can complain to them in a way that is destructive and demeaning. Which will we choose? You can compliment someone in a way that's uplifting and, believe it or not, you can compliment someone in a way that is destructive and demeaning, as well. So, do you have positive intent in your behavior and your words?

The fourth step in there is goodwill. This is on the passive side, on the receiving side of the conversation. Goodwill is listening, believing that your partner has positive intent, instead of trying to put the most negative or hurtful frame on it, looking for the most positive frame.

Then, the last one is grace, the idea that all of us are human, we will make mistakes. Even when we promise we're going to do better, we will fail. Grace is the art of forgiving someone, even before they've engaged in the behavior, just out of that knowledge that they are human and fallible.

Lee: That's very solid advice. Now, let me tell you what happens to me. I'll admit I'm a slacker, but I listen to a guy like you, I sit here and I take notes, I'm ready to roll, I go home, I give it my best shot, I keep after it for a few weeks, and life gets in the way. I'm doing my best to follow your approach but my energy wanes and I get distracted, and I just am not sticking to the approach, as time goes by. What do I do? How do I get back on track?

Don: Well, that last attitude is one that you need to apply to yourself, grace; the recognition that you're going to lose track of things and then you're going to get distracted and say, "OK. I got distracted. I fell off the wagon. Now, I'm going to get back on the wagon and start again." Some of the ways to do that, practical ways, because I'm a practical kind of guy, is put a reminder up on your bathroom mirror. All of us, look in our bathroom mirror, at least, once a day, whether we want to or not. So, put a reminder there that says, "This is something I'm committed to. Have I done this today?"

Lee: Good advice. Now listen, I know that you guys are not just talking about helping marriages get back on track, you're doing it every day. What sort of things are you doing at 3-C? I know you have some seminars. You have some services. How does 3-C help people like us?

Don: Well, you pointed out our two main ways. Number one is we have marital therapists here who are top quality, top notch, well trained and as practical as the advice you've heard today. That's an important thing because you can get marital therapists who are wonderful, theoretically, but they don't quite get to, "What do I do when I walk out of the

session?" That's what really needs to happen if you're going to be successful in marital therapy.

The second is we have two seminars here that teach the skills that you need to do these behaviors well. One is called "A New Beginning" and it's a half-day seminar, usually held on Saturdays, that folks can come to and learn these skills, practice them a little bit in the seminar and then go off and see what they can do on their own. Then, another more detailed program is a 12-week program, held on Thursday evenings, for two and a half hours each evening, called "The Emotionally Illiterate Couple".

This goes into a little more detail about how do you have conversations, what you put into those conversations, how do you confide, how do you problem solve, how do you deal with a problem solution that you thought would work, that doesn't. A lot of people fail at that point because they think, "Oh, well, you solve the problem and then it didn't work. So, now we can't talk about it anymore," instead of going back and trying to solve that again.

Lastly, how do we share fun with one another? One of the key things that I find in marital couples who are struggling and who are walking down the road toward divorce is they've lost track of how to enjoy one another's company.

Lee: I do love your practical approach to advice on this topic, and I totally agree with you. It's one thing to hear the theory, but it's another thing to hear the step-by-step "This is what you ought to do at your house tonight" and I appreciate that. Any other practical advice that we ought to know before I let you go?

Don: The number one thing I would say to folks is that if you're struggling in the marriage, the first thing that you need to do is set your own needs aside for a moment and discover who your partner is, right this moment, not who you knew them to be when you first met, not who you think they might be now, but, really, set all of that aside and say, "How do I understand my spouse?" If you start there, amazingly enough, it opens the conversation so that the other person wants to discover what's going on for you and understand you.

Lee: That's not the way most of us would approach the problem but good, good advice. It makes a lot of sense to me and I appreciate it. Don, thank you so much for taking the time and being with us on the show today. I appreciate it.

Don: You're welcome Lee. Thank you for having me on.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Don Azevedo and 3-C Family Services, you can visit their website at [www.3CFS.com](http://www.3CFS.com). I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their office at 919-677-0101. Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, if you have feedback or comments, you can reach 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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