

Lee: This is Stay Happily Married, episode #199. Can too much money ruin a marriage?

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married. Happily married. You're 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. Is it possible that having too much money can ruin a marriage? We all have stress in our lives, too many hours at work, too little time with the kids, too much money. Wait? What?

We always hear of the stress and arguments that can come from finances being stretched too tightly, but it isn't very often that we hear of the damaging effects that too much money can cause. Is it possible that living in the lap of luxury could mean losing your spouse? Let's find out.

Dr. Ashley Freeman holds a Doctorate in Counseling Psychology, as well as a Master's in Psychology from Iowa State. Her clinical experiences are diverse, as she continually seeks the new and challenging. Dr. Freeman is experienced in individual, couples, family, and group therapy for all ages.

Ashley has worked in a variety of clinical settings, including college counseling centers, group therapy clinics, university departmental clinics, private practice, and even a home for veterans. Welcome to the show, Ashley. I am really excited to have you join us.

Ashley: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Lee: I have to say that this is a hard thing for me to imagine, people having too much money and that being a problem, but I do have this vague memory of a song with a line in it, something like, "more money, more problems." Is that true when it comes to finances in a marriage?

Ashley: I actually have sort of asked this same question myself, is that really possible? I'm not really sure if it's as simple as more money, more problems. I think it will depend, as I'll be talking about throughout our conversation on the variety of factors, and I think it also, maybe the problems would change based on how much money a couple has. Whether they're fighting about if they can pay the electricity bill, or if they can afford to have a second home. You know? I guess the fighting could be different, but I'm not sure there's necessarily an easy answer that they're going to have more problems.

Lee: Right. Right.

Ashley: I haven't really had a lot of people, a lot of clients, come in and say that their problem is that they have too much money. I doubt that they would label it that as

the issue, but certainly enough people come in, and couples in particular, who are struggling with financial issues.

Lee: Right. Yeah. That's too bad, because if people were identifying their problem as having too much money, that could just be your specialty. We help you deal with too much money.

Ashley: I know.

Lee: But in today's economy, I would guess that would be a lonely practice.

Ashley: I know.

Lee: So, seriously, when you're...

Ashley: I think also it's likely, one of my colleagues was saying, a moving target, as in you get more money, you want more money. You know? You start to spend more money, you have more expenses. I don't know at what point somebody would determine that they had too much money.

Lee: Right. Right. I hear you. So, what is the problem in situations where there's too much money? What in the world could you fight about if all of your bills were getting paid and you had money in your bank account?

Ashley: I would say it probably depends on the different factors. One of them is, where the money is coming from. It could come from inheritance. It could be both people inherited the money or one partner in the marriage inherited the money, which I have seen cause problems because one person may feel more entitled to determine how that money is spent because it was their family money.

Or, when we talk about the gender equality, I have seen some cases where there was the wife who inherited the money from her family. Then the husband felt like he sort of felt guilty about relying on that money, and it can cause some issues there.

I've also heard stories of couples who get money, for example, winning the lottery. I don't have any real scientific studies to back this up but I've heard a lot of people who win the lottery end up being really unhappy, and some of them end up spending all their money. So, I think there can be issues as far as the source of the money.

Also, spending is probably one of the most common reasons that people fight about money, how the money is spent. So, I imagine that having more money, the nature of how people are wanting to spend it could change. It could be where does this excess money go? Is it going to go to charity? Is it going to go to savings, travel, status through people who have more money?

They may feel more inclined to buy things that show that they have the money, like a nice car or a bigger house, or whatever. Or are they sort of saving for long-term goals? I think it's going to depend on each person and each couple how they're wanting to spend their money.

Lee: Right. Right. Do you see much conflict over who's going to manage the money in families where there's a lot of money?

Ashley: Yes. I certainly have seen a good amount of conflict. Where I see some of the conflict coming from is also in the, one person doesn't really have as much knowledge about how to manage money. So, that inherently gives a little bit more power to the one who does know how to manage the money.

Sometimes it seems that both parties may want to be involved in how the money is managed, but again one person doesn't really know. Not to be gender stereotypical, but in some cases it's the wife or the woman who isn't as familiar with how to manage the money. Not in all cases. I certainly know a lot of couples where the female is the one managing the finances.

But I do think that that causes some issues because the person who's not as involved in how it's managed, they don't really feel like they're in as much control. They don't necessarily know how much is in there. I have encountered couples who have, there's an allowance or something, where one person manages the money and the other person is just told, this is how much money you have to spend, but that person doesn't really know what else is going on.

I think that can cause a lot of fighting and resentment. Who gets to decide how much the other person gets to spend? So, that I think comes back to the source of the money also. Does the person who brings in the money, if they're bringing in more, do they think that they get to determine how it's spent?

Lee: Right. Right. Wow. It is shockingly complicated. When you're talking to a couple that isn't yet married, do you discourage people from getting married who have vastly different financial situations or backgrounds? Do you think that's almost a destined to fail sort of thing, if you marry somebody that comes from a very different financial situation?

Ashley: No. I don't think it's destined to fail, but I think it's really important that people who come from different financial backgrounds, probably I would recommend premarital counseling and to specifically talk about their financial values. What do they think is important of how to spend the money, how they view money, what does money mean to them, who's going to manage the money? Try to really talk about some of those things before getting married.

One hot topic these days is, should you have a joint bank account or not. I think those are things to talk about before hand. So, I wouldn't necessarily say not get married, but to try and work on how you're going to communicate about the money. If it's an issue of having too much money, how are you going to deal with that, with that pressure. Sometimes there's a social pressure coming in with that also.

Lee: Right. How much is too much? When are people at a point where they have too much money?

Ashley: That is a very tough question to answer. I don't really know how much is too much money. I think that would just depend on each individual couple and their... I don't really, again, encounter that many people who... I don't know that I've ever heard someone just say, "I have too much money." So, I'm not really sure what the answer would be to that.

I think that if it's causing a lot of problems, then you could probably look at anything in life and say, if the money is causing a lot of problems then maybe it's too much money. But, it might not be that it's too much money. It could be just that you and your partner need to figure out how to manage the money or how to communicate about it. So, it's really hard to say how much is too much money.

Lee: Right. It's a little depressing, but listening to you I'm sort of coming to the thought that it doesn't really how much money you have, if you have lots and lots of money or if you don't have very much money at all, money creates conflict in marriages. It just sounds like it's sort of unavoidable. I always thought, well if we had lots and lots of money, this wouldn't be a problem, but from what I'm hearing from you, it doesn't really matter how much you got and money creates problems.

Ashley: No. It doesn't seem to matter because, again, I think it might influence the nature of the fighting or the actual fight. Like, okay, we're going to fight about the fact that the electricity got cut off, for people really don't have enough money to even be able to provide for their basic needs, food and safety. Those people are going to be very stressed out about just getting by day to day.

I think the people who have a lot more money, it's just going to keep probably going up. Expenses can keep going up as they incur more bills. So, even a couple with a lot of money could still be getting into debt.

You still have to decide how the money is spent, even how you're going to save the money. Is it going into retirement? What are you doing with the money? So, I think no matter what, there still has to be an agreement on how the money's managed. So, yes. There's going to be fighting.

Lee: Right. Right. Too bad. It would have been nice if making lots of money would solve all of your problems. What about situations? You've talked a couple of

times about the source of the money. What do you see happening where, let's say one spouse is the CEO of a company and is making \$1 million or \$2 million a year, and the other spouse is not really earning much at all? Do you see that becoming a big issue where one spouse is really the source of most of the income to the family?

Ashley: Yes, it can be an issue. I don't think it has to be an issue. I think in some couples, they are able to work it so that they have a division of labor that works for them. I think it depends on how that couple works with the situation and if there is resentment on one person... So, if the CEO, let's say, that they decide that they're going to get married and they're going to have children.

The CEO is the man and the wife is the one who's going to stay home with the children. I guess it depends on how they break that up and how they view it. Does she feel like she gave up her career in order to do this, and as it seen as an equal contribution to the family that she's taking care of the children and he's working and bringing in the money?

Lee: Right. What if you flipped that situation upside down and you make the wife the CEO of that company? She's making all the money and the husband's not really making very much at all. Does that get more complicated in our society? Does the guy sort of feel emasculated by the fact that his wife is the big money maker?

Ashley: I think that that can happen. Now somebody told me or I read something recently, that it's becoming more and more common that the woman is the bigger earner, and there are more and more stay at home dads. So, I think things are really changing, but I also do think that can be a problem, and I think it depends on to what extent both, or the man, kind of ascribes to the more typical gender roles.

Do they really feel that to be a man you need to be the bigger earner and really provide for the family financially? Or are there other ways to provide for a family by taking care of the kids or being an emotional resource? I think it sort of depends on how each person is looking at it.

But, I think the good news is that, that is changing. We're seeing that become more acceptable and I think that more and more men are becoming comfortable being in that role.

Lee: I could get comfortable with it. Yeah. I'm ready. Bring on the money. My wife is trying to, she wants to be a novelist, so she's trying to sell a novel, and nothing would make me happier than if she sold that thing for millions of dollars. I'd be a very happy guy. I could be a stay at home something. Let me ask you this

Ashley: Yes.

Lee: When you've got these families where there's too much money, and the money is creating issues for this family, if you just pull a plug and you took all the money away, that wouldn't really solve the problem, would it?

Ashley: I don't really know that it would. I think the majority of the issues would not go away. Coming back to the same point that you're still going to have the basic issue. Really the underlying issue is, can this couple come together and problem solve? Are they communicating effectively about money? Do they understand each other? That's not going to change whether they have a lot of money or not.

They're still going to have to decide what to do with their money, whether they have a lot or not. It depends if you're taking them from a lot of money to a moderate amount of money, or are you knocking them all the way down to where they can't pay their electricity bills, so they're certainly going to be fighting? So, yeah. I don't know that you can ever really take all the fighting away, or all the problems.

Lee: Well, when you have a couple in your office and too much money is the issue, and you've got to get them on track, what do you recommend? How do you recommend that they get the relationship back to where they'd like it to be?

Ashley: Well, first of all, I think with any couple, whatever issue they're dealing with whether it's money or something else, you really want to work on the communication. I think the first place is to really help them understand each other. I like to say, seek first to understand and then to be understood.

So, trying to really understand where your partner is coming from and that doesn't just mean that, okay, why is this person angry today, but also sort of discovering each others' history with money if you don't really understand it. I think for a lot of people, money is an emotional issue.

Some people came from nothing and they are afraid that maybe whatever they earn they'll lose it, so they want to save it and cling to every penny that they make. Other people came from a lot of money, they're used to privilege, they like having nice things. To sort of help people understand where the other person is really coming from financially. How is money dealt with in their own family of origin? How is that impacting their relationship?

Then also, communication in general, helping them talk about the money in a calm, effective way, because this is often a heated topic. So you might be working on some basic communication skills. I would also recommend, if necessary, that they seek guidance from financial experts. It could really help them if they're not knowledgeable... Even if they are knowledgeable about money, I think a financial consultant could be helpful.

I would encourage them to look at the marriage as a partnership. It's not necessarily that everyone has to bring in the same amount of money, but you're working together for a common goal. Also, looking at strengths and weaknesses. Maybe one person's strength is managing the money and someone else's strength is managing the home, for working together, again, as a partnership.

Lee: Right. Right. All good advice. I hope we're helping folks that have too much money. I'm confident that we're helping everyone who feels like they don't have enough money because at least we're all recognizing that we're all in this together, and that no matter how much money you have we have very similar problems. I think that's comforting. We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else that people ought to know about dealing with these financial issues?

Ashley: No. I think that's about it. I think my last point, just about coming at it from a partnership perspective is probably where I would like to end. It's just working on the relationship, improving communication. As far as the having too much money, again, it is really complicated because we didn't even touch on the fact of, was it all of a sudden too much?

Did you just inherit the money or have you always had a lot of money? That's going to have an impact also, but I think making sure, especially in communication, conversations. Even if they come in for couple's counseling, to be talking about how that change, if there is also a change in the financial status, how that's impacting people. How are they adjusting to all of a sudden coming into a lot of money and managing that?

Lee: Terrific. Ashley, thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your thoughts on this topic with us. I never would have thought having too much money would be a big problem, and now I actually, I really believe it. I buy it. I can see where having too much money can be as big a problem as having not enough money. Thank you so much for helping us to understand that.

Ashley: Your welcome.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Ashley Freeman and Lepage Associates, you can visit their website at www.lepageassociates.com, that's L-E-P-A-G-E, associates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. The phone number there is 919-572-0000. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week.

We always love hearing from you. If you have feedback or comments, or suggestions, 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. Happily married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at

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