

Lee: "What I Learned From John Edwards." This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 206.

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.

The media is overloaded with stories of celebrity divorces and politicians in the middle of scandalous affairs. Whether it's John Edwards or Newt Gingrich, these politicians are conveying a message to the masses: Marriage is not their priority.

When news breaks of a politician having a secretive and scandalous affair, we're shocked. Shortly after the news leaks we see a picture with a devoted spouse standing by their partner, declaring the strength of their marriage. What message is this sending to the public? Are they saying that it's okay to cheat because your devoted spouse isn't going to leave? I don't think so. Real life doesn't conform to the Lewinsky rules of the political sphere.

Dr. Don Azevedo joins us today to tell us what you can learn from the scandalous politicians as well as how to resist the temptation from outside the marriage. 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. His 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. Don, welcome to the show. I'm glad you could join us again.

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

Lee: It seems like every few years we have one of these big adultery scandals with a politician. We recently had the John Edwards trial and his mistress, Rielle Hunter, just released a tell-all book. It seems like his name is everywhere we turn. How much do you think the media has an influence over how we act in our own relationships?

Don: This is a debated topic, how much influence the media has in terms of our personal behavior. The reality, though, is that people experience, over and over again, this as the norm. If you're rich and powerful or just in the media, having an affair is okay, it's tolerable. Then their resistance to having an affair goes down. It's just a negative effect overall.

Lee: I can see that. All the TV we watch definitely changes our perceptions of things. Do you think it's getting to the point where adultery is okay? Is this sort of thing just encouraging people to go out and cheat on their spouses?

Don: I don't know if I can go as far as saying 'encouraging' adultery or setting out to go do this, but it certainly takes down one of the barriers preventing adultery when it does happen. The most dangerous place for your marriage is your workplace. Look at the relationship between Mr. Edwards and Miss Hunter. That happened in the workplace. They were working together on that political campaign, spent a lot of time together, enjoyed one another's company, one thing leads to another, and there you have it.

Lee: Right. It takes two to tango, as they say, and you can't have an affair on your own. You've got to have somebody else be involved. Mostly, the people that we meet, like at work, know that we're married. That's not a surprise to them. Most people have a picture of their spouse on their desk or on their computer monitor. Why is it that people are willing to get involved with somebody even though they're all ready married?

Don: This comes back to the media piece. Our community has turned a blind eye, essentially, to adultery. They've looked at it and said, "I'm not going to judge you if you have an adulterous affair." You won't be excluded from the community involvement, your workplace. I think the only place where adultery is still punishable is in the U.S. military, where it's a breach of the Uniform Code of Military Justice to have an affair. You can go to Leavenworth for that one.

Everywhere else, it's just, "Okay, yeah, whatever. You're having an affair." One of the worst pieces is the attitude out there of, "It doesn't bother me if it doesn't bother you." That's where these folks who are outside the marriage who are courting, essentially, a married person, really no longer have the shame or the stigma of breaching the marriage. Even Miss Hunter said in one of the interviews that she didn't break up Mr. Edwards's marriage; it was all ready broken up. The implication is, "It's okay for me to pick up the pieces."

Lee: Absolutely. You're right. The attitudes have definitely made a shift over time. I sit here listening to you and that's kind of the way that I see things now. I can see where that's not good for anybody.

I think a lot of people are unhappy about one thing or another, and they think if they have an affair, that's going to be the solution to whatever it is that they're feeling. What's going on in their heads when they make that kind of a decision?

Don: One of the things about an affair is it has all of the good stuff of a relationship, and none of the work. When you're off having an affair, this person is interested in you. It's brand new so you're more interested in them. There is a sense of secrecy, so the sex has a spicy quality to it. Both of you tend to be more accepting of the other person's point of view because it's the new part of a relationship and you have no responsibilities to one another.

This is very unlike a marriage, where there's laundry to do, and dishes to wash, and groceries to buy, and kids to deal with, and bills to manage, and a house that gets broken and needs to be fixed, and all of these responsibilities. People are looking at, "Oh, look at all the spice over here in an affair, and look at all this work over here in a marriage." "Look over here in the affair where this person is interested in me, look over here in my marriage where my spouse no longer even asks me about what's going on in my work life or in any part of my life." That's the attraction to the affair.

Lee: Right. I'll tell you what, if you were a TV infomercial for an affair, I'd be buying right now. It sounds pretty good. But I know there's a lot of fallout. Having an affair is obviously a very selfish decision, and when your spouse figures it out, the stuff hits the fan. But aside from the impact on your spouse, do you see negative fallout for people who make this decision to go ahead and have an affair?

Don: Oh, yes. The person who has chosen to have an affair often feels some level of guilt. There is a sense that, "I am breaking a vow, a commitment, a contract that I had with my spouse." They may do a lot of work in justifying and explaining. "I'm only breaking it now because they broke this other part of the contract." "I was so unhappy in the marriage. That they wouldn't listen to me, they wouldn't care for me," or whatever their excuse is for that, but they have done the ultimate break of the relationship by betraying the trust that's in it. They know that, so they feel some level of guilt.

The worst part is when they get over the guilt. That's actually worse for them. That breaks apart who they are, because now they have accepted that betraying that kind of trust, betraying that kind of contract is okay. That's really the worst part for our society. More and more people who make that choice, they're not trustworthy in future contracts. Their word really has no value.

That's the worst outcome. The other part of the negative outcome is the anxiety. "I have to keep lying. I have to keep covering things up. I need to make sure I cover all of the trails that will lead back to this affair." That

takes a lot of energy and a lot of time, and ultimate you're going to screw that up. Somebody's going to catch you.

Lee: It makes me anxious just thinking about having to deal with something like that. I'm glad to hear there are some good reasons not to have the affair. Let me ask you this about being discovered, finding out. The word on the street is the spouse always knows. They figure it out first. Is that the way that really goes down? Does your spouse usually have a pretty strong suspicion of what you've been up to?

Don: My experience has said that frequently that's the case, but there are lots of times when the spouse truly has fully trusted the other person and doesn't know that they are not supplying something in the relationship or that the relationship is not good for their partner for whatever reason.

Let me give you an example. I hate to be sexist; I don't mean it this way. It could be either spouse, but I need to pick one in order for the example to work. Let's say it's the guy that's an executive. He travels frequently for his job. It could be in sales, it could be in any part of the executive world. He travels a lot so he's away from the family a great deal. Wife has been a stay-at-home mother. She's taking care of the kids, really focused on that part of her job, really attentive to the children, not particularly attentive to Husband, partly because he's away and partly because it's very difficult to make that transition coming back into the home.

Husband starts feeling more and more that, "I'm being ignored by my wife. I provide everything for this family. I'm being used." Justification for, "I can now have an affair." Wife is completely oblivious because she thinks she's doing the job he wants from her. She thinks that she's providing for him because he hasn't said a thing about this. He's just been stewing over his own juices.

He's out at work, working with a lovely lady who appreciates his brilliance at work and activity. He also appreciates the woman's brilliance because she's working and earning money and all these things that he's judging his wife for not doing, that she is unaware of. He justifies the affair, starts having it, comes back and finally tells her, or worse, she discovers it because she goes to a doctor's appointment and she now has something she didn't expect.

This happens far more often than you'd think. That's another negative side effect of affairs. Affairs are not STD-free. Then all of it breaks out. All of a sudden he's now saying the marriage has been bad for 10 years, she's saying, "I've been raising your children for 10 years," and the fight ensues. I'm sure you've seen it, Lee.

Lee: Right, and it's not pretty. You describe it really well. I think you give us the inside perspective on what's going on emotionally and how the parties are dealing with one another, but it's very tough.

Let me ask you this now. Let's say that you're a particularly sneaky adulterer, and you're good at it. You don't get caught. Your spouse never figures it out. You got away with it. What's the impact of that?

Don: For the person who got away with it, there may be a sense of triumph. "I've had my cake and I've eaten it, too, or, "I'm eating it." It's not even in the past tense because it's going along. Often, though, what they miss is they can't quite be fully emotionally present to both relationships. Often it's the spouse that ends up feeling very lonely, very disconnected, very like there's something just not quite right but I can't put my finger on it, and because the spouse trusts, they feel bad about saying to their cheating partner, "You know, I just don't feel like you're here with me. I don't feel like you're giving me enough attention."

Of course, if they're very good at manipulating the situation they'll turn it back on the spouse, saying no, that's really only their perception and that's not reality, and they'll point out a handful of examples where they've done things with the family, where they've done things with the spouse, and he or she is not judging them fairly.

Lee: Right. I have to ask you the "chicken or the egg" question. Are you one who believes that an affair is the cause of the marital problems, or is the affair just a symptom of larger problems in the marriage? What do you think about that one?

Don: It is a "chicken and the egg," and it's hard to generalize to all circumstances. Certainly there are people who are just nefarious out there and will go have an affair even when their partner has been doing everything that's necessary in a marriage. In my experience, though, the people who come to see me for marital therapy, the marriage was often broken quite a while before the affair choice was made. What was broken in the marriage could be one of a thousand different things.

The thing that is consistent, though, is that it's broken because both partners have failed to come to the table and talk openly with one another about what's not working in the relationship. If you don't come to the table and say, "This is what's happening for me," your partner never has a chance to fix it. If you don't come to the table and listen carefully, that whether you intended it or not, this is what's happening for your partner, and say, "All right, now how are we going to solve this problem," the problem can't get fixed.

People suffer in silence and loneliness, often for many years, before the affair happens. Someone takes advantage of their loneliness and starts paying attention to them, and that attention gets turned into a feeling of love. Then they say, "This is justified," and off they go.

Lee: Right. You're saying that this communication issue creates a fertile ground for affairs. The "chicken or the egg" question, we'll never know the answer to, but are there other patterns or triggers that you see? Are there things that are the warning patterns in a marriage that you say this is a marriage headed for one spouse or the other getting involved with another person?

Don: There are standard trouble spots in a marriage. We have the icon of "The Seven Year Itch." That was a great movie, and pretty typical. It happens a little sooner now in marriages. There are places where marriages get into trouble, like the birth of the first child. It's not that the child causes this, but because there's a new entity in the house that is very dependent, how the two parents negotiate time spent with one another as well as time spent with the children makes a huge difference. Each additional child also becomes a potential breaking spot in the relationship unless the couple pays special attention to that. Even though the birth of a child is a joyous occasion, joy also has stress and difficulty with it if you don't attend to it.

Promotions at work are trouble spots for marriages. You would think, "Hey, this is a great thing. We're getting promoted, more money in the family," and all the rest of this stuff, and there's more stress, more difficulty. New things need to be learned and done. Time often gets crunched very quickly. Again, if you don't attend to, "How are we spending time in our marriage, how are we feeding and caring for our marriage," often the marriage slides off the radar, only to starve to death because of a lack of time and attention.

Another stress point happens in normal development. We're moving more towards mid-life, let's say around 40 or 45 years old. Parents start to become ill or have difficulty or go through their own challenges. Now you've got kids that you're trying to take care of, you have a spouse that you're trying to take care of, and you have your parents that you need to attend to, to some degree, and you're getting more responsibility at work. That sounds like a perfect storm, doesn't it?

"Where's my time going? How can I deal with all of this?" And that continues. Kids get into teenage-hood. You have to get them a car, or they want a car. You have to teach them how to drive and deal with that stress. They're going off to college, with that stress. Now we're at the empty nest syndrome. You're looking over at your wife saying, "I've been doing so much at work. I've been taking care of my parents. We've been working on the kids. Who are you, again, and how do we reconnect?"

Of course, through all of that there often isn't enough time for fun and laughter, and just being with one another, because there are so many things that you have to do or perceive that you have to do. Unfortunately, in our current society we put marriage at the bottom of that list, and your marriage needs care and feeding on a daily basis.

Lee: That leads me to ask you this. What are the successful couples doing to stay faithful? How do they stay motivated to keep working on the marriage? Where does that come from?

Don: One of the things that I say to folks is you have to have fun with your partner. I've been married for 29 years, delightfully so, to the same woman, so it's not a cumulative thing.

One of the early pieces of advice I got was to wake up every morning deciding, "What am I going to do today that will delight my partner?" Just a small thing, like a text in the middle of the day that says "I love you" or "I'm thinking about you," or a note. I travel a fair amount doing corporate consulting, and my wife will leave me notes in my suitcase that I discover as the week goes on. Little, tiny things like that that you can do every single day to delight your partner. If you wake up every morning with that intent for the day, your marriage will be well along the way of being in a much better place.

Lee: Right.

Don: It takes a concerted effort. Go have fun. If you remember back before you got married you would date this partner. You'd go out and do fun things together. You have to do that after marriage, too. There has to be time that you do that where the children are not involved. I'm a big advocate for kids; I have two myself. I have loved raising them, and I needed to make time for my spouse so that the marriage was strong so that we could give to them the greatest gift you can ever give to kids; a strong, solid home.

Lee: Terrific advice. Let me ask you this. I have friends who have said to me, "Boy, if I ever discovered that my spouse was having an affair, that would be the end. Game over. I'm moving on." Are you finding that people are working through it after an affair, or is that just the end of the marriage right then and there, somebody walks out the door and it's over?

Don: It doesn't have to be over. I have a fair number of folks, probably about half of the folks that have come to me after an affair has happened, who have been able to put the relationship back together again, who have been able to forgive one another and make a new commitment to a new marriage.

One of the things that I'm a strong advocate of is, it truly is a new marriage. I get them to get a new marital date, a new recommitment of their vows, not necessarily that they have to do in front of a community of folks, but to one another they are making a new marriage with one another, because the old one is badly broken. That covenant has been lost so they have to make a new one with one another.

There are people who will do that, so an affair does not have to be the end of a marriage. Indeed, it can be a strengthening of the marriage if it wakes both people up to the fact that they need to do the care and feeding of that marriage on a daily basis. Some folks come out of it a lot stronger after the affair. It is possible.

What's not possible is if one of the partners begins to ruminate on what the other one was doing with this affair partner. I get that frequently, where one spouse says, "I need to know everything. You have to tell me everything you did with him or her," and the spouse complies, providing all of that detail. Now that detail is a visual image that the innocent partner is now ruminating on and can't get out of his or her mind. Those become nearly impossible cases to resolve because the trauma is happening on a daily basis.

Lee: I'd like to do a program with you, just a whole show on the step-by-step of how you work through it, because it sounds to me like it's possible, at least for some couples, but it's going to be tough. I think we could give some folks some good advice.

We've covered a lot of ground today. Any final words of wisdom before I let you get back to helping people work through their issues?

Don: This is a practical tool that couples who are listening to this can use to assess their marriage. I recommend to folks to assess their marriage at least once a year. One of the ways that my wife and I have done this is on our anniversary, or the month of our anniversary depending on what day it lands on, we'll sit down and talk to one another about these three questions.

The first question is, "What do I get from this relationship that I really want and enjoy?" These are the positives. This is the reason why I'm in the game with you. List that out to one another and don't be shy. Put everything that you can think of that you enjoy and relish about this relationship right there on the table. That's a wonderful way to start. It's a foundation.

The second is to share with your partner, "What am I getting in this relationship that I don't want? What are the things that are happening, what are the changes that have occurred over this past year that, "I really don't like this. This isn't working for me. Can we do something different?" You won't solve the problem at the time that you're discussing this, but at least you're confiding that this problem is there and something the two of you need to address.

When your partner is doing this, sharing with you what it is they're getting in the relationship that they don't want, try not to get defensive. Try to hear this as confiding and important to the relationship. It's not blaming, it's not attacking. It's an issue that can be solved if the two of you work on it together.

The third question is, "What do I want from this relationship that I'm not currently getting?" This may have been something that you got in the past that somehow drifted off. One of the things that often does is a monthly date night. That may have drifted off, and you want it back. It may be something that you've never asked for before, like, "I want to go back to graduate school and I need your support for that." Anything that you're wanting from the relationship that you're not getting, put that on the table, too.

If you assess these three big buckets of stuff and then do something about them, maintain the ones that are wonderful for you, change the ones that have been difficult, and add the things, as you can, that aren't currently there, your marriage will grow and deepen. You can keep it for a lifetime.

Lee: Fantastic. Those are three questions that really do put your focus on the right stuff. That is terrific advice.

Don, thank you so much for being with us today, I really appreciate you walking us through these issues and sharing your advice. It's terrific.

Don: Wonderful. Thank you, Lee. It's been a pleasure being on your show.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about Dr. Don Azevedo and his practice, 3-C Family Services in Cary, North Carolina, you can visit the website at the number three, the letters C-F-S, 3CFS.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their offices at 919-677-0101.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope you will join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at 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](mailto:Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com) or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.