

Anna: "The Nine Phases of Marriage". This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 218.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Anna: Are you sabotaging your love life? I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Statistics show that 85% of single women can't wait to get married. But do they really want the whole package? We already know that women have vastly different expectations of marriage than men do. So it should be no surprise that men don't always live up to those expectations. As many as 70% of wives express unhappiness and dissatisfaction in their marriages over time. And that's a pretty big number. Is that just part of the natural cycle that marriages go through? Or does it signal a larger issue? When women are dissatisfied, what do they do about it?

Our guest today has the answers to these questions and can help explain why couples experience these cycles, and she has some tips on marriage: How to make it, break it, or keep it. Susan Shapiro Barash is the author of 13 books including, "The Nine Phases of Marriage" and "Your Grounded Forever, But First Let's Go Shopping". Susan teaches gender studies at Mary Mount Manhattan College and helps women understand the issues they face during marriage. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad you could join us.

Susan: Oh, thank you for having me.

Anna: Absolutely. All right, so I guess we'll go into some of these questions for you. Your latest book, "The Nine Phases of Marriage: How to Make it, Break it, Keep it", talks about everything from being the hopeful bride to success in the golden years. In it you mention that celebrity culture has an influence on couples. Do you find that's damaging to relationships?

Susan: I think that in some ways it is damaging because the divorce rate seems pretty high as we watch these celebrity couples. On the other hand, it also underscores what we already know from the culture at large which is that marriage is so highly touted and so valued in our society.

Anna: Yes.

Susan: I also said, I also... I'm sorry.

Anna: No, no. Go ahead.

Susan: I was going to say, even though there have been some very famous people who have been married forever. Paul Newman, when he died in, I think, 2008 was quoted as saying about his 50 year marriage to Joann Woodward, who was also an actress as I'm sure you know, that something like when have steak at home, why go out for a hamburger? Which is something we have heard many ways, but I think it originated with him. Then you can look at someone like Elizabeth Taylor who was actually his peer and she had seven marriages, wasn't it?

Anna: Right.

Susan: So, there you go and, of course, in both cases the world was watching. If we fast forward to younger celebrities today, we see a lot of marriage and remarriage.

Anna: Right. Like the Kim Kardashian 72 day marriage.

Susan: Right, or if we think of Tom Cruise who has had three wives.

Anna: Right. OK, yeah.

Susan: And we all lived out those wives and how they are famous women, too.

Anna: And it certainly seems that celebrity culture is sort of creating an infatuation with the perfect wedding.

Susan: The perfect wedding and the first phase in my research in my book is on the passion and longing phase which becomes really all about the wedding.

Anna: Right, right. Made up.

Susan: I'm sorry, my phone is beeping. In our society what we do is we fall in love at a certain age, and then it moves towards marriage because that is what is highly emphasized and expected. So, we take romantic love and put it to good use in marriage. And then women say, but it's not romantic anymore.

Anna: Right, right.

Susan: And that's really part of it, too. Then what happens as we go along in these marriages, that romance sort of dissipates.

Anna: Right. OK. Well, you said that about 70% of women express unhappiness or dissatisfaction with their marriages over time. Is that a general sense of unhappiness, or does it relate to certain aspects of marriage, and is that normal?

Susan: There are many women who are disappointed, either in terms of the emotional component of their marriage or the sexual component of their marriage or just feeling really unsupported by their husband in terms on finances. And curiously enough, we all know that many women earn money and work and have careers. Thirty percent of women are the major bread winners in their marriages in America today. Yet, there is that kind of traditional expectation that a husband will be a provider. If your husband losses his job or if something goes wrong with his career, wives are very disappointed.

Anna: Right, right. So, is that normal? That happens, I guess, a lot it seems like.

Susan: I counted it happens in about 70% of the cases. You know women hold the bar very high as wives. They enter these marriages expecting a great deal from their husbands, and the husbands sometimes can't keep up, they just can't. It's just not in their make-up or their personality or their attitude is a bit old fashioned, kind of like, I married you, didn't I? What more can I do?

Anna: Right, right.

Susan: But women are looking for more than that. They really are.

Anna: I see. So, what does that tell us? You know, that women are increasingly dissatisfied with certain aspects of their marriages? I mean, is that because women are now more aware they had better options than maybe, their mothers did?

Susan: Well, there's no question now that there are more options available to women today in terms of work, the kind of career you'll have. You could go to a sperm bank if you wanted to have children. You don't have to necessarily feel that you have to get married. You could get divorced and remarried, which happens very often. There is still the desire to be married.

Anna: Of course.

Susan: Yeah. It's very valued, as I said before, a goal for many women. And we look to it as a solution which is always a problem because we really need to come to this relationship whole, in order to see where we go with it, in order to grow as a couple.

Anna: Right, right. For sure. So do you think that too many women they see marriage as maybe, it has to happen. It's something in their life that they have to have and it has to happen, or else their life will not be complete unless they get married.

Susan: There is definitely that way of thinking. In this study, when I spoke to women who were divorced or widowed or unhappily married, they all spoke about a second chance. And for those who were unhappily married, they struggled with what to do with it in enough cases because they felt so committed to being a wife. So, yeah, it's really important in our society. It's a couples society.

Anna: Very true. Very true. So it seems maybe... it says, 60% of wives feel that they married for the wrong reasons. Is that something that you've researched?

Susan: Yeah, that's one of my statistics. What happens is you don't always know to whom you are married until there is a crisis or until something happens, and you start to look at the relationship differently. And that's part of the issue. The issue really is that you think your husband will act a certain way, perhaps. In the third phase of the book which is called, "Child Centricity", I looked at couples who had children and how the wives felt about the change in their marriages as a result of having children. Then, the wives really felt the romance flew out the window. They felt totally on board with their husbands in terms of how to raise the children in enough cases. But, still the children became the center of the marriage and that changed the equation. How about the wives who didn't exactly agree with their husbands on how to raise the children? That took a turn for certain because the balance in the marriage is shifting.

Anna: I'm sure that would create a lot of stress on the marriage.

Susan: It really does, yeah. So this is what's going on. And yet, the women really are invested in the role of wife. It's complicated today. As I said we hold the bar high, we have a lot of expectations. We value the romantic part of the marriage. There are so many reasons why it can go wrong and so many reasons why we want it to be right.

Anna: So, those statistics are pretty interesting, and the numbers seem pretty high as far as unhappiness in women goes. So, do you think that we are going to see an uptick in the number of divorces that occur?

Susan: No. Divorce and marriage are both down statistically in America. There are less couples getting married. Although, believe me, there are still millions of people getting married per year and there are less divorces, slightly less on the divorce scale, too. We're seeing that that is actually lower. But, what I'm hearing is women who were trying... The reason I wrote this book, which is part a guide book, with some take-away at the end of each chapter is like a prescriptive part. A way to better understand who you are and what you can and can't have in a marriage, it's very important to understand that.

Anna: Right, maybe, also knowing if your marriage can be saved and if not, when should you make that decision to call it quits?

Susan: That's right, and so by phase six which is called, "Fracturing, a Midlife Divorce", I take a look at the women who really feel that they've done everything they can and because women get to reinvent themselves at every stage and age in our country today, which is really new and notable. There are women who even at 45, 55, 65 who are saying, this doesn't work anymore and why not move on? Which I think is really interesting.

Anna: Also, you said that marriages go through cycles. So, could you maybe, describe sort of the phases of marriage that you discuss?

Susan: Well, the book is written in chapters, but I call them phases, and the idea of writing these phases was so that we could see where we've been if you've been married for a while, or where you are going if you are in the beginning of a marriage. So, as we said, I think it starts with passion and longing, but by phase three it's a child centric marriage which I think is always about having children. In many marriages there are children born into the marriage within a few years of getting married, but the child centric aspect is new. By part two of the book I was really seeing that there could be tension, that there was distance, that some women decided to get divorced, and then in the last part of the book I look at second chances. Remarriage or renegotiating the marriage you have. Having the courage to say to your husband, "We've had tension, distance, all that was in the middle part of our marriage and let's really try to save it. Let's renegotiate what we need if we change because part of the reason I wrote this book is that we live a long time and we evolve.

Anna: Right, right.

Susan: So, yeah. We evolve and our marriage, it's not the marriage that our mothers had, that our grandmothers had, but it's a new kind of marriage.

Anna: Yeah, totally. I mean, I completely agree. I think that we are constantly evolving. You're not going to be the same person you are when you're 23 as when you're 43.

Susan: No, no. And yet, some basic aspects of our personalities remain, but we have to remember as women we are part nature. What is your nature? What is inherent within you as a wife, as a woman, as a friend, as a mother, as a colleague? And what is really the nurture? The nature is just what is within us, and then the nurturing is what the culture tells us, what is taught to us from the outside in. And that is what we are as wives, a combination of those two things, especially for women who have been at it for a while, maybe, someone who is a GenXer or a Boomer wife or even beyond and has been at it for awhile.

Anna: So...

Susan: So even for... Oh, I'm sorry.

Anna: No. Go ahead, go ahead.

Susan: So for those women, renegotiating your marriage or a chance of a second marriage is investigated in this book in a way that really intrigued me because women feel very confident that... It's, "Oh, my goodness I'm 45, what can I do? I might as well stay. I'm stuck. I'm too old or, I'm 55 or 60." They aren't not saying that any more. They're saying, "Let me work at this marriage. If it really can't be fixed, then let me move on."

Anna: Right. So, I'm sure, women will be relieved to know that marriages do go through cycles. So, it's not as if all of these marriages are going to end up in divorce. And, since you teach gender studies and help women understand the series of issues they face during marriage, let's start at the beginning, maybe, planning the wedding. Do women start to experience issues during the planning phases, like well before they are actually married?

Susan: They really do. It starts early. They take a look at their fantasy wedding, and they push very hard for it. And as you push for it, you end up causing friction early on between you and your fiancée, and maybe, your parents are even annoyed at you. Maybe, you're spending too much money, too much emphasis on what kind of gala. For some women, there's this very new trend to have such a quiet wedding that you're excluding half the people your mother wants there. So that's in reaction to the opulent wedding. But whatever kind of wedding you chose, whether you think it's simple or not, the idea that there will be some kind of tension. You're right, it's inevitable.

Anna: And what about the decision to take his name or keep the maiden name?

Susan: Right.

Anna: Will that impact her career and the way she feels about herself?

Susan: It's fascinating because women really still struggle with this, but the majority of women take their husband's name, even today.

Anna: Yeah. I'm wondering how that would impact a career that much, honestly.

Susan: Well, it depends. If you've been at it for eight years and you've really done well, you have to really consider that. But, if you're just starting out and/or you're perhaps, in a new career and you're 33 years old, but it's a brand new career, then there's a different reaction to keeping your name.

Anna: OK, yeah. Now, so once a couple is married, settles down, and has kids, usually what we see happening is that the parents spend all their energy focusing on the kids. You were talking about child centric or something?

Susan: Child centricity.

Anna: Child centricity, yeah.

Susan: It's true. It really gets in the way of couple time. Time is such a premium in our fast action packed society anyway that the idea that you're now putting the children forward. Collectively, you and your husband seems to make a lot of sense. But what I've found in this phase is that after a while enough wives say, "Oh my goodness. What about me? What about us?"

Anna: Right, right.

Susan: So, that's part of it.

Anna: Yes. So it's definitely still important, very important for the couple to have time to focus on each other and take time for themselves and their own relationship with each other.

Susan: Yes. Through every phase I encourage communication, respect, the time for the couple, date night. All of it, very important. And you know, it's easy to let it slip. It's really easy to let it slip. So, the kind of communication you need, the kind of energy and support, it's ongoing. It's not like yeah, we talked last week. We're on hold right now because, in the end, that creates a lot of pressure in the relationship.

Anna: And so, then when we get to talking about when a wife might feel like the emotional and physical connection is missing from her marriage. I'm sure we've all seen a lot of cases where one spouse feels like something is missing, so he or she goes off to find the missing pieces somewhere else. And then, that can create a whole mess of problems.

Susan: Yeah, that's true. Being on the same page growing together, that's a very big component of marriage at every phase. But, you know after 10 or 15 years are you still growing together, are you still in synch? For women whose husbands who are wanting to retire, the women are like on a second career, huge tension. How do you navigate all this? How about where will you live once you are retired? Where will you live when you are a young couple? Do you and your husband agree, should you buy a house? Should you rent? So, all these issues are ongoing. It's not like you hit a new phase and you say, "Whoo, thank goodness we're on high ground here." It's a constant suffusion of energy and thought about another person. And I think that's what is so fascinating. Long marriages have lots of different changes and ongoing perceptions of what he wants and what you want.

Anna: So, if we're talking about that missing piece, and if someone goes out and cheats. If a wife cheats, would you say that she feels entitled to this affair and maybe, sees it as a way to find what's missing in her marriage?

Susan: Oh, yes. Totally. Female infidelity, which I've been researching for years, and I wrote a book all about that. It's a part of this study, too, because it's a part of how women lead their lives. And yes, it really does happen, and it really is about what's missing in a marriage, and a woman may not be able to leave her marriage financially because of children. There might be a lot of reasons why she won't leave it, but she will have the affair. Sometimes, it even strengthens the marriage which is striking in its own right, right?

Anna: Interesting, yeah definitely. You wouldn't think that, but you know.

Susan: No, it does in a way that we haven't really seen in the past because women are thinking about it differently than they used to. Again, the role of wife is really changing in America, and that's why I wrote this book and that's what it's really all about.

Anna: And so, they say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and it sounds like even short absences like a little break here and there can help out spouses get along better and appreciate each other more. That way they can get to that successful phase in the golden years, right?

Susan: Well, clearly if you can get through, it's all about adjustment. What is your expectation with your husband? Do you expect that he should be around you? Do you understand his career? Do you yourself travel for work a lot? These are all the questions that are put to the test in long standing marriages. And sometimes, things change. You used to be at home, now you have to work. Your office moved and it's in another town. All these ways that wives really have to adapt for themselves, for their husbands, for their relationship. We have three things going on. We have the relationship, we have the wife, and we have the husband. And remember my book, "The Point of View", is all about the wife and how she feels. I interviewed, I think I told you, 200 women and I have a questionnaire at the end. So it's all about how women perceive it which to me is always fascinating.

Anna: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. So, I guess, maybe what I'm taking away from this is just... Are you saying that definitely going through all these different phases of marriage, going through the hard times and going through the many, many years of being together, a big part of that, an important part, is being able to adapt?

Susan: To adapt, to work together. To make a decision about what you need in this relationship. To make your needs known. To have respect for one another, which is so critical. To really respect each other's needs. And then there are children who grow up, children who never seem to grow up. Emerging adulthood is this new trend in young adults where they really aren't quite autonomous for many years which we are aware of. Grandchildren being born into the family. It just goes on and on. There's always a way to be working through the marriage and adjusting to new conditions. Maybe, this is even a wrap-up, but what is always prevalent is the desire to be a wife. Eighty-five percent of the women with whom I spoke really wanted that.

Anna: Absolutely. Definitely. Of course.

Susan: That's what is so interesting, too.

Anna: Yeah, they know all these things that go along with it, but, definitely that underlying, deep need or want for that.

Susan: Yeah, to be defined as a wife and to be a wife.

Anna: Right.

Susan: Yeah.

Anna: Susan, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Susan: Thank you for having me on.

Anna: Absolutely. To find out more about Susan and her books, you can visit her website at [booktrib.com](http://booktrib.com). That's booktrib, B-O-O-K-T-R-I-B dot com.

Susan: And also at [SusanShapiroBarash.com](http://SusanShapiroBarash.com).

Anna: And that, too. Awesome. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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