

Anna: Creating a passionate relationship, not for the faint of heart. This is Stay Happily Married Episode No. 234.

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: I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you have what it takes to create and maintain a passionate relationship? In the midst of keeping up with the demands of modern life, like paying bills, maintaining a household and career, and raising a family, it's easy for a couple to let go and lose sight of their once intense and deeply satisfying connection. When that goes on for too long, though, it becomes harder for the couple to stay in it for the long haul. In the beginning, couples make long-term commitments to each other in hopes of experiencing deeper levels of connection and passionate engagement. What they often forget, and sometimes ignore, however, is the importance of nurturing their relationship and keeping the passion alive on a daily basis, and for the remainder of their lives.

Our guest today is Dr. David Aspenson, a licensed psychologist who practices in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. David is a big believer in creating and maintaining a health, passionate marriage, and he's here to discuss the challenges that are associated with preserving the passion. Sound a little intimidating? Worry not; it is, in fact, possible for all of us. Welcome to the show, David. I'm so glad you could join us today.

David: Thank you, Anna. I'm happy to be here with you today.

Anna: Great. All right, let's first start with identifying what passion is, and what a passionate relationship might consist of.

David: All right. Well, let's begin by saying a bit about what I don't think we're talking about today, or what I don't think the kind of passion that we're going to talk about today really is. It's not necessarily just about having hot and wild sex, though that certainly may well and should be a part of it. It's not the passion of what we might consider the initial encounter of a relationship, the neurobiology of attraction.

Anna: Right, like the sparks.

David: Yeah, and I'm not talking about passion that's like the stereotypical Italian, waving your arms about and throwing plates, and wild conflict.

Anna: All right.

David: What we're talking about is what I would consider is the possibility, this part of a long-term and enduring relationship where you create and maintain an intensity of feeling and positive engagement. To say that we're passionate about something just means that it's something that matters to us very deeply, right?

Anna: Right.

David: So, a passionate relationship is a kind of living organism. It's an ongoing experience of vitality and the authentic intimacy that provides the real juice of a relationship.

Anna: I see; OK. So, for a relationship or a marriage, how important would you say having some sort of passion is?

David: Well, if I were speaking just for myself, I would say it's absolutely, vitally important, partly because that's me. I think, in part, the answer to that question maybe that it depends some on what you want. Is this what your desire and intension is for your relationship is to have a passionate one? Maybe, it's not for everybody because, like I said, in many ways it's not really for the faint of heart. It doesn't just happen automatically. I know for me, there's something that feels deep in my soul that longs for the experience of deep connection, and I assume that that's kind of universal but, of course, I don't know that for sure. It's just my values in a sense.

I was listening to a neighbor who is a woman who I saw on a Ted Talk that a client turned me onto recently. And she was talking about what she calls the power of vulnerability, and she wrote recently a book on wholeheartedness. I was listening to her talk again, and she did start out by saying, "think connection is what we are here for." And I believe that.

Anna: Right. So I guess it seems like passion is something that could keep the relationship or the marriage going, after you've been with someone for many, many years. And at some point you start to feel like maybe you've lost it, but then, I guess, is it pretty normal for couples to feel like they've lost passion?

David: Well, I think, Anna, that there are some different ways to keep a relationship going. If that's the main objective, to keep a relationship going, grim determination can do that, just saying, "I'm just going to keep doing this because I'm going to keep doing this." But if the intention is to create an ongoing vital relationship, then passion and the experience of passion and the authentic intimacy that creates passion is very much a part of that.

I think there are a lot of reasons why in our world anyway, at least, the part of the world that I'm familiar with, that is many ways a kind of hard won prize when you think about it. How many people do you actually know or have known that really are living that kind of a vital, passionate, engaged relationship? It doesn't just happen, and there are a lot of ways in which it can go to ground along the way, just as we go about tending to all the things that we have to attend to in the course of living our life.

Anna: So, do you think it's sort of ultimately the lack of passion, or lack of that deep care and connection that wears couples down over time?

David: Well, yeah, I think so, and it can happen without you really noticing it, because as you tend to the business of life, all of the different things that are involved in keeping a roof over your head, a career going, raising a family, keeping this primary, vital connection alive does take a very concerted and sustained attention. You have to know that you want it. You have to have a kind of deep commitment to creating it, and have some way of supporting and maintaining that. And there's no one right way to do that. There are lots of different ways that might suit an individual to create that in their life, but it's not just going to happen over time. Like I say, the initial thrill of a courtship - that just happens. You don't really have to do much to create that.

Anna: Right.

David: And it creates, unfortunately, I think, a kind of expectation, that this is something that just happens to you. So when that initial buzz fades, as it does for all of us, we may feel like, well, that just happened, so there's nothing to really do about that, and all that's left is just to adjust and adapt, but I think adjusting and adapting is in many ways the death of a passionate relationship.

Anna: Oh, yeah, definitely. I can see how that would happen if people just kind of accept the fact that, oh, it's not the same as it used to be, and it'll never be the same. What you're saying is that they can gain it back, and gain it back not just like with the drop of a hat, but obviously it takes a lot of work, and like you said, a big effort to make this happen and make sure that the passion stays throughout the relationship.

So, before we talk about how the couple can create and maintain this passion in their marriage, can you give us an idea of some of the main differences between, just like a functional relationship, one that people just settle into and kind of accept versus one that has a lot of passion?

David: Well, I think that the key difference comes back to this matter of intimacy. What drives the experience of passion in a relationship is the experience of intimacy. And again, intimacy is not something that just happens if you find the right person. The experience, I think, ongoing, authentic intimacy requires in some ways that you bring forth the very best of yourself. So in a passionate, engaged relationship there are just these visible signs of life that may not be dramatic, like they may not be over the top drama, but just the quiet intensity of people who are just maintaining that sense of being really into each other as individual selves. You have to bring yourself to have the experience of intimacy. You can't borrow yourself from a partner, and think if only my partner is alive and vital they'll provide that for you. In some ways, you have to develop your own personal richness that brings that to the table.

I was just thinking this morning about someone that I knew some years ago who toward the end of his life said to his adult daughter, "I really blame the marriage therapist that your mother and I saw decades ago for ruining my life, because they convinced me to stay in this marriage." I thought that statement was just outrageous on so many different levels.

Anna: Yeah.

David: But the main one being, here's a person at the end of this long course that was saying, "I had no real responsibility for how that turned out." It was like, somebody did that to me. And I think that in a nutshell is the difference between someone who has the capacity to create and maintain a passionate, engaged relationship and someone who doesn't, who just is not willing to take responsibility for it.

Anna: So I think that's an interesting point, and what you said before about how it's not about what your partner is doing for you. Like you said, if they're all lively and happy and wonderful, then they'll just kind of pass that along to you, but it's really about finding that within yourself, and your partner finding that within his or herself and then you guys being two complete, wholes on your own, and then coming together and making an extra special relationship, sort of?

David: Yeah, I think that's a good way of summarizing it. I think, of course, what you just described is easier to say than to do.

Anna: Right. Of course.

David: To actually do that, I think, requires a real serious intention and commitment. I think it's the kind of a work of a lifetime, and that all of us in some ways are going to fail at it, and that's not a bad place to start. I was talking with somebody just this morning who said, with their spouse in hearing distance, "I'm just an incurable idiot." And I said, "Well, when it comes right down to it, we're really all incurable idiots in this arena, because there are just a thousand ways to get it wrong." But what we aspire to is to, in some ways, be curable idiots.

Anna: Right. Get it right.

David: Well, to figure out what it is for us to do. So, that might be as simple if someone is really in a relationship in which they are saying, "Man, passion. That's a thousand miles away from where I'm living," and they feel deeply unhappy with the state of things. The first real, authentic step might be just to sit down and say directly, look your partner in her eye and say, "I'm just not happy with the way this is going." And that's quite a vulnerable place to start. I think an even better one would be, "I'm really unhappy with the way that I'm doing this relationship, because that's a way of saying, I'm not just saying you're doing this to me, but I'm not really happy with the way that I'm doing this." Even better would be, "I'm not really happy about the way I'm doing this and I'm determined to figure out for myself how to make myself available for the kind of relationship that I want to have." Now, that's a person that's got it going on.

Anna: Right there, yeah. So I guess that's a big thing. That might be maybe, then the first step in starting to get a passionate relationship going, creating it, then maintaining it; that is, taking responsibility for your part in however the relationship is going. And not putting the blame on your partner, and not saying like, "This is what you're doing wrong," but rather looking at yourself, I guess.

David: That's right. Even if somebody sits down with their spouse and says to them, "I want a divorce." For some people, for some relationships, that can actually be the beginning of a new and real passionate engagement because that person is just like stepping forward in some way and saying, "Business as usual is not going to work for me. I'm not just going to adjust to it. Something different has got to happen." And if that person's not literally committed to the idea that the answer is to leave, then it may signal the beginning.

Anna: Right.

David: Of a whole new possibility. Of course, the risks are real, and as we know, a lot of marriages do end in divorce; a lot of relationships don't make it. And many, if not most of us, kind of go around and around this wheel. But I think the real adventure, if we have the gumption for it, is to stay where we are and to figure out what is our work to do? What do I need to do to take care of whatever my dilemma with intimacy is, which we all have? If you can appreciate, really get that, whatever struggle I'm having, and having the intimate connection I desire, is my struggle and I stop blaming my partner, or my partners in the past, or my family, or television, or the world, or whoever, and just take responsibility for that, then something new can happen.

Anna: Right.

David: But again, it's easier to say than to do. I so take inspiration from the couples that come to see me there who are looking for some ways to do that for themselves, because they help keep me honest. If I'm going to be congruent, I have to find some way to walk my own talk here, and I haven't always done that. I have my own failures along the way. But I'm still breathing, so I'm still working on my cure, too. The first step, I think, is to take a step of personal responsibility for whatever the nature of the relationship is as it stands. I think in a sense that's one of the secrets of creating anything of value in life is to take a kind of radical absolute responsibility for the outcome of that thing, whatever it is, whether that's creating a passionate relationship, or launching a new business, or raising a healthy family. Whatever it is, if you do that, then you've got some power in the matter. If it's like, well, if only somebody else would do this, or if only this hadn't happened, if only my family had been different, or whatever, you look to hold responsible for the state of things, then you're going to be eventually stuck there.

Anna: Right. That does make a lot of sense. Well, why do you think that the first, well I guess it's pretty much, it seems like it would be common sense that people wouldn't want to take responsibility, because they wouldn't want to put it on themselves, or they're afraid to, maybe. They're afraid of what? They're going to learn about themselves?

David: Well, it's hard. The tricky part about assuming responsibility for ourselves is to figure out a way to do that without blame and self-judgment. Oftentimes, as a first pass we try to take responsibility for our condition of things we turn on ourselves, like, if only I'd done this, or if only, if only, or I should have. So the next step is to let go of the self-judgment and in a sense acknowledge your own willingness to have the courage to do that, and to start there, with a kind of support for yourself, rather than blame because you really have then taken the steps that are powerful steps, that have the potential to literally create what it is that we're trying to create.

Anna: Right. Definitely. So what are some of the other things? Like, the first step, is maybe teaching yourself to accept responsibility for how the relationship is going. But then about the maintaining part; is that maybe just continuing to have yourself as an active part in this relationship, and making sure that you're taking responsibility?

David: Well, I think there are a number of really important practices to work on. Maybe, one that we could touch on today is what's called a self-validating intimacy, which is a little bit of a curious expression, which you may not have heard before. It's not really part of the popular literature. I owe it to David Schnarch, and I recommend his book, "Passionate Couples" to anybody who's seriously interested in this topic because it's just an unusual book in the field. He asks a lot of his reader, but there are some practices and some concepts that I think are genuinely and uniquely helpful in this arena.

One of them is to really articulate what self-validating intimacy is. And what that basically means is that what we tend to think of as intimacy, or our experience of intimacy, is really other validated intimacy. In other words, we think this is what we're looking for, I share myself with you, and you share yourself with me, and we have this kind of deal that says, I let you know who I really am and you validate me for the effort. So there's an underlying expectation. This is like the underlying expectation of our quest of the sort of romantic relationship, like, oh, I love you. Oh, I love you. It feels so good and juicy. But it's not really sustaining, because what's not happening there is what's required for the long term, is the ability to say, "I'm just going to in a sense give myself to you. I'm going to tell you my truth; I'm going to bring my own precious vulnerability into this connection. And I'm going to take care of myself at the same

time.” In other words, I'm not really demanding that you make that OK for me. Do you get the distinction?

Anna: Yeah.

David: It's like, this is my choice. I'm making this offering to you, and I'm taking care of myself as I do that. That's what we mean by self-validating intimacy; it's a totally different experience.

Anna: Right. Not expecting the other person to take care of you.

David: Yeah, and what we popularly tend to think of as genuine intimacy is just this sort of unsustainable mutual admiration society, which anybody that's lived with anybody for any period of time knows that that goes to ground pretty damn fast.

Anna: Oh, yeah.

David: Beyond that, if you want to keep the possibility of a sustained, passionate engagement characterized by authentic intimacy, then it requires figuring out a way to take care of that for yourself, saying, “I'm bringing my vulnerability because it's my choice. Maybe, you won't see that; maybe, you won't like it; maybe, you won't whatever. It doesn't really matter. I'm just here because I choose to be here.” So that's maybe, a little bit abstract, but I think you get the idea. I think that, too, is a kind of a practice of a lifetime. It doesn't just happen.

Anna: Right.

David: It requires really figuring out how to take possession of yourself while you're in an intense relationship with somebody. That's what I think sustains passionate engagement over time.

Anna: Right.

David: You can't leave home without your own self, and have that experience. So that's a very important practice, and, I think, worth chewing on. If it sounds curious, I encourage listeners to just chew on that - the self-validating intimacy. What might that look like? How would that be different to what I typically do, or expect my partner to do? Because it does, as a practice, open up new possibilities. Again, it's like that person who just says, “I'm not really happy,” and they make themselves OK with that statement. They kind of let go, like maybe my partner will receive that. Maybe, they'll say, “Well, go jump out the window”, or whatever. But I have that to say, and I'm just saying it, and I'm going to be OK with that, no matter what my partner does about it.

Anna: Right. Everyone should give that a try, really, and see what happens.

David: Yeah.

Anna: Well, David, is there anything else we should know?

David: Well, I guess I would say in summary that for me, I think what we're talking about here, the enduring ongoing passionate relationship is a great prize.

Anna: Absolutely.

David: But, I was thinking, someone said that Mark Spitz - and I don't know if you remember him, but some years ago he was an Olympic athlete who walked off with seven gold medals.

Anna: Oh, yeah.

David: And he said something along the lines of, "Yeah, people think it would be great to be a champion, but nobody talks about the training."

Anna: Right.

David: You think about that. Well, he didn't get there just wishing that it was going to happen. He did his work to get to that place. It was a sustained, deeply committed effort. To be a champion in that sense in this arena, I think requires the same kind of intention. We need to train.

Anna: Yeah, that's a good point. I like that, for sure. Well, David, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

David: Sure, Anna, it was my pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about David and his practice in Chapel Hill, you can visit his website at www.davidaspenson.com, or you can call 919-402-9212 for an appointment. 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. I'm Anna Riley. 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 email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.