

Anna: Thinking outside the box, using creativity to strengthen your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 241.

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. Are you and your partner thinking outside the box when it comes to your relationship? Say you've been married for 20 years, or maybe even just 2 years. Is the relationship still fun and fresh? Are you and your partner getting the most out of your marriage? Sometimes couples that have been married for many years begin to feel a sense of staleness in their relationship. Maybe they have ongoing conflict and difficulty resolving it, or maybe they simply feel like they've lost the passion and excitement they once had. When this happens to a couple, whether they've been together for 20 years or 2 years, the partners begin to grow apart and disconnect from each other. And to fix the ongoing problem, many couples end up forcing a solution by pushing harder and, ultimately, doing the same thing over and over again. Interestingly, the solution to all this is more attainable than people think. Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein, the director of Orenstein Solutions. Susan says couples can reignite their passion and start having fun again simply by thinking outside the box; by doing even just one thing differently. And if you're thinking you can't do it, think again. Susan's here to share some of her inspiring ideas. Welcome to the show, Susan, I'm so glad you could join me today.

Susan: I'm delighted to be here. Thank you, Anna.

Anna: So, when couples come to see you for marriage counseling, for example, what are some of the biggest complaints they have with each other, or with the marriage itself?

Susan: There are two issues that I see again and again, and it seems people say the same thing. So the first thing people say is, " We've grown apart, we're just like roommates," and what they're talking about is feeling that the spark is gone, there's no romance, things are really stale and flat. And then the second issue is that people feel like they're walking on egg shells; that they never know what little thing they might say or do that might set the other person off and vice versa. And so they're walking around feeling really tense like there's a ticking time bomb.

Anna: Which I can imagine is not a good thing for a relationship.

Susan: Not at all.

Anna: That's very unhealthy to do that, yeah. So when couples have these issues and whether they're deep rooted or not, what's the first thing that you say to them?

Susan: I say, something that you're doing isn't working, and so we have to figure that out, and make sure to stop doing that. So basically, do less of what isn't working, and find out what they are doing that's working and do more what is working. It's pretty, pretty simple.

Anna: Right. Yeah.

Susan: And that each person is part of this dance, it's really a two person dance, and either one of them can set a tone to make change in the relationship, and that they each need to change their step to create a new dance.

Anna: Right. Yeah, I see that. So, then, do a lot of people initially resist your suggestions? Or maybe they make up excuses and justifications for what they are doing, or how their relationship is going. Do you see that a lot?

Susan: I do see that at times, and I think what happens is that husband and wife feel like they're not being understood. That they really do have good intentions, they really do have valid needs. So, in that case, when they're arguing to keep doing the same thing again and again, I just do my best to show them, yes, it's not that your needs are invalid, your needs and your goals and your wants are very, very important. But what we need to look at is your approach; that's what's not working.

Anna: Right. That makes sense. So then, if a couple is going to change things up for themselves, for their relationship, you know, maybe for themselves individually, what are some of the ways that they, well at least as a couple, what can they do to start thinking outside the box when it comes to their relationship?

Susan: To make a small change, even if it's just one small thing, one small thing can lead to that domino effect where lots and lots of other changes will happen. And so, for instance, and some of this amazes me, this is really the fun part of my work, is I will see a couple, I'll see

somebody make one small change and witness the reverberations. For example, I had a couple, and they were arguing about household chores for years, and when they came to me, at one point we came up with the idea that the wife would write down how to do the laundry and post it on the door in the laundry room. And it actually worked. So it was so easy for the husband, he really wanted to help, but he couldn't remember the details of what goes with what and he would ask her again and again and she would get annoyed, and it was as simple as writing it down and him seeing it that made a huge difference. He was happy to do the laundry, that wasn't an issue, and there wasn't that negativity that had been there before.

Anna: Yeah. She's happy she doesn't have to explain it every time.

Susan: And it seems like, oh it's just the laundry, but it became so much more than that because...

Anna: Right.

Susan: ...it became an ongoing conflict. So writing something down, for example, that was one small thing, took maybe five minutes, made a huge change.

Anna: Right, right.

Susan: Yeah. Another example I find fascinating is that people will just look at their non-verbal behavior. I had a couple, and when she would be listening to her husband and start to feel the sense that she would put her fist into her hand, and she would start getting really, really tense. Her shoulders would go up, and once we pointed that out, she took note of that, uncrunched her fist, put her shoulders down, and be back in a place where they could be receptive and have a conversation. And she even could laugh about that later. He could point out, you know just point to her hands, she could...

Anna: Yeah.

Susan: ...relax herself and they could end up being productive. So that's a very small change, but very, very powerful.

Anna: Yeah, that's interesting. That does make a lot of sense, you know that, I mean, a lot of times I think that couples, maybe the big issues start, obviously, from something small. Whatever it is, oftentimes it starts very small, and then, if it keeps going and going, it gets bigger. So, then, like you were saying, one small simple change can make a world of difference.

Susan: It's fascinating.

Anna: Oh yeah. So, then, what about thinking outside the box, when it comes to romance and passion? Like, if it's not about an issue like laundry, or bad communication or something; if it's about losing that spark or the passion, they feel like it's gone. What are some of the things they can do to think outside the box when it comes to that?

Susan: The thinking outside the box there would be doing the 180. Sometimes, when couples would come to me and they're upset about romance and their sex life, they become so serious about it because it is really painful and people are feeling vulnerable and ashamed. And it becomes really, really painful and about blame and hurt. And so, a 180, that would be thinking outside the box is to lighten up, to find little ways to have romance and to improve their sex life, that can be silly. And so it could be a flirty text message, and that's all there is to it. It doesn't lead to anything, it's just enjoying that. Or going on a bike ride together, getting a change of scenery and some fresh air and so that you're not in that same box where it's just not working and you're reliving what's not working. You should actually get out of that, and do something completely different.

Anna: So, yeah, not just changing things but even changing scenery would be a good idea.

Susan: Absolutely, absolutely. And I've even had couples...so change of scenery is huge and I think one of my first podcasts I did with Stay Happily Married was on the environment, and I have a very good friend in the area and her specialty was feng shui...

Anna: Oh, ok.

Susan: ...and she did a podcast, too. I'd actually love to go back and listen to that, her name is Jenna. But it was remarkable because she would talk about the one small change in a bedroom. Like moving a picture that maybe your in-law gave you that you never really liked, but you felt obligated to put on the wall. Taking that out of the bedroom could make a huge change in people's romantic life.

Anna: Huh, interesting.

Susan: It was. So, it could be a picture, some artwork, some clutter. It could be actually instead of having conversations after dinner with all the dishes caught up, and the mail that you're looking at, you actually go outside and go for a walk around the neighborhood with your partner. The change of scenery does so much for our mood, our body, and leads to a whole different feeling.

Anna: Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah. So, then, if this is something that couples can do, to improve their relationship, you know, get closer to each other, kind of have this reconnection going on, it seems like thinking outside the box can be an important thing. So, what is a way, or how can a couple maybe foster a mindset of thinking outside the box and continuing to think outside the box?

Susan: What they can do is recognize when they're getting tense and stressed, and realize that that's only going to make the situation worse, that's being in the box.

Anna: Right.

Susan: So, like I said with the woman whose shoulders would start to tense up, her hands would clench, if you hear your voice rising in anger, you feel that stress response, then you're inside the box. So you have to think how to get outside the box is to get yourself in a relaxed place. And that's where creativity comes from. Creativity doesn't come from a place of anger and frustration, and anxiety, creativity and new ideas come from a place of curiosity, and wonder, and openness. And that's what I try to create in my office is a safe environment where people can feel free to wonder and be curious, without blaming or judging. So, for couples to get outside the box, I think it's really helpful for them to find a way for them to relax themselves, relax their own bodies, and take deep breaths, be in a calm place.

Anna: Yeah. That sounds good. So you're talking about this wondering curiosity kind of mentality that you have going on, and in your office and what you try to portray to people and have them feel. And, so, is that like in the relationship itself, maybe having this sense of wonder about things in the relationship, or about their partner?

Susan: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Love the question. If you think about a new couple getting to know each other, you think about them stargazing.

Anna: Right.

Susan: You think about high school girls at a slumber party, having that pillow talk where you can say anything, and it's dark, and you're not worried about being judged.

Anna: Right.

Susan: And you can fantasize out loud, so when people just start dating, and start to feel really comfortable with each other, that is the really fun joyful part where people start to feel really connected and excited and cared for. So, if couples can do that, find a way to stargaze, so to speak, or to dream out loud, or share their fantasies and their dreams and their hopes, that's a terrific way to get creative, do things outside of the box.

Anna: Right. Dream out loud, I like that, that's good. Well, Susan, is there anything else that we should know?

Susan: I think it's so important to dream and there's so much in the news about our health and how it matters that we get a good night sleep. That that affects all of our health, our immune system, our mood, not only sleep, we have to dream. We have to dream at night, and we have to dream while we are awake, and that's what keeps us going. So that's what I would like to end on today.

Anna: OK, good. I like that. Very nice. It's good that you talk about sleep. Just a couple of episodes ago, we had talked about the effects of sleeping habits and all that on marriage, and that's definitely something that's important. But I like the dreaming thing too, for sure. Dream when you sleep, dream when you're awake.

Susan: Yes, yes ma'am. Thank you.

Anna: Very Good. Yeah, OK. Well, Susan, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Susan: Always a pleasure.

Anna: Always. To find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.OrensteinSolutions.com, that's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N Solutions.com and I'll put a link to that in the show notes so you guys will have access to that. Or you can call 919-428-2766 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.

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