

Anna: His friends, her friends, our friends. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 257.

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. How can couples pick good friends that are healthy for their relationship? Sometimes, in the beginning stages of a marriage, couples are more focused on starting and raising a family. They can become more centered around parenting issues, like how to raise the kids, where to have family vacations, who will pick the kids up from school and take them to various practices, things of that nature.

When the kids get older and more independent, however, there's more time for a couple to build a social life that revolves around things other than play dates and kids' birthday parties. But what if a couple ends up facing conflict as a result of their social life? How can they navigate it together so that both partners are happy and comfortable? At times, couples might have to take a closer look at their friendships and determine what the root of the problem is because sometimes, it's not necessarily the friends.

Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein, the Director of Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Susan has worked with many couples who have faced these very issues, and she's here to discuss a way to fix the problems. According to her, when a couple is in a place where they can trust and respect each other, she can guide them to be more creative with their problem solving techniques. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Susan: It's a pleasure, Anna. Thank you.

Anna: So let's start with kind of going over the main issues. So what are the main issues that you see couples running into when it comes to having outside social lives and groups of friends?

Susan: I think there are two. One is I see couples, sometimes they don't have children or they're in a young marriage, or sometimes they're older and their marriage is in a rut, and they just can't get themselves out of the house. They're getting bored with each other. There's not much excitement. And what we talk about in our counseling is how nice it would be for them to have a social life, but the problem is just getting a fire under them.

Those couples often procrastinate, and it just takes a little energy and commitment to think about how to build a social life, how to take the initiative, how to kind of have courtship with other couples to make friends. So one issue is kind of that stagnation when couples don't really have a social life.

Then on the flip side of the coin is in my practicing and in general what I see with friends who are married and in my own married life, is particular issues or conflict that comes up in your social circle. So people who have friendships and conflict arises for a variety of reasons, and so then the couple's arguing about that particular couple, and I can go into more details in a bit.

Anna: Right, right. So if we're talking about the issues that couples have with friends, instead of not having a social life necessarily, but if they have a big group of friends and stuff, do you see these issues kind of happening with newly acquired friends?

Susan: It could be, or it could be friendships that they've had for a while that start to morph into something else. So sometimes there's some kind of stress or some kind of change in the couple relationship, and one partner will start loosening some boundaries with somebody in another couple, and that's one of the worst case scenarios is when you see some infidelity that can happen.

Anna: Right.

Susan: In other issues that can appear, it could be that the social life starts to revolve around something that one partner isn't comfortable with. For instance, if there's too much partying or drinking or a couple might notice that their partner is starting to hang out with friends that are newly divorced or who are kind of bashing their husbands or their wives. So all those things really threaten marriages.

And the idea really is to build a social life to support the marriage, to make it stronger. That's why people really enjoy having weddings, because they have their friends and their family all there to support the family. So when couples have a social life with friends that are actually undermining the relationship, then that's very threatening.

Anna: Yeah, I can imagine. So I guess that could be with the newly acquired friends that we talked about, or really with couples who have had a big group of friends since before they were married.

Susan: It could be either way. So I think what would change things is if it's been a stable friendship for a really long time, what might change things is if somebody's going through a big stressor. Let's say, one partner is starting to travel a lot, or the couple in themselves are starting to distance from each other. That's when some of these problems arise, like I talked about infidelity or starting to drink more with their social outlet.

Anna: Right, and do you see sometimes couples, this may be an element of jealousy coming up?

Susan: Absolutely. So when there's jealousy, sometimes it's irrational. Sometimes one partner is kind of making up a story, making up a problem, and they need to talk about it and build trust, but other times the jealousy is based on some intuition that person has or something they've seen, a boundary starting to be crossed and they're absolutely legitimate.

Anna: Right. So then how can a couple pick good friends that are healthy for their relationship and not undermining the relationship?

Susan: What I tell couples, and what I think I do in my own personal life is I look for couples in my social life that I see as healthy and committed to each other that have integrity and good boundaries. So I think where it gets dangerous is if a couple knows that other couples are going

through some really difficult times, or, let's say, they attack each other in public or make scenes in public or make sarcastic, passive, aggressive comments in public, it's just not going to add good will. And probably what's going to happen is in your marriage, somebody is going to be pulled in. It's just going to be messy. So the whole idea is to build a social life that supports your marriage, not gets into somebody else's marriage's drama. That's the last thing you would want.

Anna: Right, right. For sure, yeah. Stay away from the drama.

Susan: That's right.

Anna: So then what if one partner in the relationship is sort of a social butterfly, an extrovert, and they like to do stuff and go out and have fun, and the other is more of a homebody. How can they work around that dynamic?

Susan: That's a great point, Anna, because I see that so much. In couples [inaudible 07:59] comment at all that somebody who's more introverted would be attracted to somebody who's more extroverted and vice versa. And some of the times they can complement each other, but other times there can be friction. I think it's all about creating some kind of balance, some kind of compromise.

So in that instance, if there's somebody who's really more of a homebody, maybe their compromise could be, "Okay, I could have some friends over, but let's try entertain them at our house," or if somebody is more of a social butterfly and they know their partner is more of an introvert, they can kind of suggest, to take two cars, or let's take a break in the middle of the day so that you can have your alone time.

I think what's important is couples really are attuned to each other's needs and look for some kind of compromise. But if you're by nature an introvert or by nature an extrovert, that's definitely not something that's going to change, so I think couples really have to respect the differences there.

Anna: Right. So, do you ever see couples having to get rid of certain friends completely or maybe distant themselves from any particular group because they just can't make it work?

Susan: Yes. Yes, in general, I discourage big emotional cutoffs. I think if there's a chance for people to resolve hurt, or frustration, or conflict, then that's much better. But there are certain cases where it's really necessary to cut ties, and what comes to mind immediately would be any kind of affair because they just cross the lines to have any kind of healthy relationship at that point.

The other scenario in which that happens sometimes is with issues like substance abuse or some other lifestyle kind of thing, where if the couple is committing to some kind of lifestyle and then their social life really is undermining that, it's just healthier to cut ties.

Anna: Absolutely. So then what are some of the other ways that if you're talking to a couple in maybe a counseling session, what are some of the other suggestions that you have for couples to

kind of reach a compromise on friends and make sure that their social lives are good but still make sure their marriage is good, too?

Susan: I think encouraging the couples to talk about what their needs are and explicitly talk about their needs instead of kind of knee jerk reactions. That's really helpful, so that's what we do in the couple sessions is really have each person identify what they need. And sometimes people don't really know what they need, they just know what they don't like, and it changes when they're in a counseling room and things are quiet and they're given the space.

By answering some of the questions I pose to them, that helps them organize their thoughts and actually figure out, "Oh, that's what I don't like about this," or "That's what I like about this." And that helps couple figure out different solutions. It gives them a way to identify what they need and have the other person listen.

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

Susan: In today's interview what we're talking about is some of the dangers or some of the things to look out for when building a social life. What I would want to encourage people to recognize also is there's a big advantage to adding more support in a couple's life. I've talked to a lot of couples once they're in a long-term marriage, once their kids leave the house, that start to get bored or in a rut, and having other people to care about them, to support them.

Let's say, if one of the partners in the couple is sick to have friends that are there to support them or cheer them on and celebrate their success is really a boost. And so, I think it's important for couples to be willing to take some ups and down, recognizing that this could really enrich their relationship.

Anna: Right. And do you think that with having a solid social life and a solid group of friends, do you think that some couples find themselves appreciating their partners more because they have this additional support?

Susan: I love that question. I think so, and this is just anecdotal from my own experience with my husband is that when we go out in our social life we're going to dress up a little bit better. Our manners are going to be a little bit better. When somebody asks him a question and he's talking to them, I listen a little bit more. It just kind of energizes me a little bit, and I think it helps me see him in a different light.

Anna: Right.

Susan: Which is really, really nice and I think the same way. And so, I do think it helps couples keep from taking each other for granted by having more enrichment, more stimulation, more people in the mix.

Anna: Yeah, definitely.

Susan: And that doesn't mean I don't think that intimate one-on-one time isn't important because I think that's super important, too, with all a balance.

Anna: Yeah, definitely. All a balance. Well, Susan, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Susan: Always a pleasure, Anna. Thank you.

Anna: To find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com, and I'll spell that for you. That's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N solutions.com, and I'll make sure I put a link to that in the show notes, 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.

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 e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.