

Opening: New Year resolutions for couples. This is Stay Happily Married Episode number 277.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you know how to keep your relationship exciting? With the New Year comes new resolutions and new promises to ourselves to do better in the upcoming year.

After the holiday mills and goodies, we resolve to better our physical health by eating better, exercising more, and cutting out the sweets and sodas. We promise to kick our bad habits of smoking, drinking, or biting our nails. Some even decide to become more organized, reduce stress levels, and be more independent.

We seem to be more focused on making ourselves better, but what about our relationships? Is there something we can do in the new year to keep our relationships healthy and exciting? Earning her doctoral degree in counseling psychology at Temple University, Dr. Susan Orenstein is founder and director of Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Dr. Orenstein has devoted her professional career to helping individuals and couples improve their most intimate relationships. She specializes in relationship and couple issues. Dr. Orenstein is committed to providing state of the art practices in marital counseling, and to that end, continues to attend professional training programs. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Dr. Orenstein: I'm excited, too, Scott.

Scott: Well, today, we are looking to you for some help on keeping our relationships exciting. So, what is it exactly that you see couples are facing in their relationships as time goes by?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, for most people, the honeymoon fades or wears off because what we know from science now is there is this chemical induced lust, love, excitement, whatever you want to call it, and it usually lasts for 6 months to 2 years. It fades, and then life happens. There's a mortgage. There's taking out the trash. There's kids. There's the dog peeing on the floor, and the pleasure is gone from life. But that's not all life has to be. It can be lots of fun and exciting. You just have to do things to make that excitement and fun happen.

Scott: What are problems that you see couple experiencing when they aren't able to keep this excitement in the relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: What I see in my private practice is that some people have a say passive stance so they have an expectation that they're going to have a great marriage. Otherwise, why would you get married? And then, when the excitement fades, they're fairly passive about it and say "Oh, well, I'm not in love anymore." They start to feel unfulfilled, unexcited, not having things to look forward to, but at the same time, they're not taking the initiative to make any changes, and they might

even get angry at their partner, expecting their partner to figure all this out instead of working on it together.

Scott: Well, if they find themselves stagnant or unfulfilled or even, like I said, just now getting angry, what are some of the negative effects that actually occur in a relationship when these couples are stuck and are unable to keep moving forward?

Dr. Orenstein: Unfortunately, people can look outside themselves. You know, we all have blind spots, so we would hyper-focus on our partner's flaws. First, we would take out our frustration on our partners, thinking it's their fault and become more and more distant and look for excitement somewhere else, and turn, perhaps, to shopping, or drugs, or an affair, or golf that we start to turn away from our partner for that pleasure and excitement.

Scott: So you start looking outside of the marriage and other things that you mentioned, affairs, drugs, golf. Emotionally, how would that affect someone?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, emotionally, that really hurts the marriage, so sometimes when people come to my private practice, their marriage is, I say, kind of in a coma state. There just really isn't the affection and intimacy. The people have really turned so far away from each other. And then, sometimes, and this is kind of surprising, it surprised me, but when couples are really angry at each other, that's a step before the coma stage. That gives me some hope because that means there's still some feelings and some passion. I need to help redirect the feelings so that people aren't hurting each other and being hostile, but at least there are still emotions that we can work with to get that spark going again.

Scott: That's a great point. At what point do you see that couples realize that they're having trouble moving forward in their relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: That really depends. There's such a wide variety. I mean, on any given day in my private practice, I'll see a couple that has been suffering in silence for eight, ten years. You know, the whole time the kids are growing up they're really, really unhappy. And then, at other times in the day, I might see a couple that has been married less than a year and they're starting to realize there are problems. And the sooner people come for help and learn some tools, the sooner they can get relief, and they can revitalize their marriage. And it's not too late when people wait too long, but it's a lot harder because there's a lot more pain, some wounds, and a lot more healing that needs to take place. So, I love it when people want to be proactive and work things out when they're starting to see problems early on.

Scott: Okay, well, it sounds like there's a lot of variety. It varies probably from couple to couple realizing when their having trouble moving forward. Other than that, have you observed any trends or patterns among couples that are having problems moving forward or keeping that excitement in their marriage?

Dr. Orenstein: I see some trends, and that is when couples with young families tend to struggle a lot just because there's just so much stress placed upon them. Balancing their

work and home, and parenting is tremendous, and then adding the intimate relationship just seems to be one more thing that they can't add on. So, I see that with busy professionals with kids who are really loving good parents and dedicated to their kids, I think they're vulnerable to having marriage problems because typically, marriage ends up on the last, may not even make, the to-do list.

Scott: So, if one of our listeners is stuck or they're bored, they've lost excitement, what is your suggestion for couples who need a little help putting that excitement or the vitality back into the relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, I love being able to have this interview, now, right around New Years. You know, it's early January, and I think this is a great time to set goals, not only in one's personal life but in your relationship life, and I thought that this was interesting. I discovered that the Romans came up with the name January for the god Janus who was the god of beginnings and transitions. And so, Janus has two heads. One's looking back and reflecting, and one's looking forward in January to the new year. So, I think that's a really exciting, this is a really exciting time now for couples to look back, reflect, think about what hasn't gone so well, what has gone well, what are their goals for the upcoming year, and make some goals together for the relationship. And what we know from social science research is that when people not only think about goals but when they specifically articulate them and write them down, they're much more likely to succeed. So, there really is a science to this. It really does work and so, I strongly encourage people to have New Years resolutions.

Scott: I really love that etymology lesson you gave us on the word January. That's very cool.

Dr. Orenstein: Thank you.

Scott: Well, let's drill down on that point a little further if you don't mind. Are there any specific items that couples should work on that you think would help resolve some of those negative issues that you listed earlier when it comes to setting up these dreams or goals?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, we can think in a macro level and a micro level. So, a macro level for the big picture is just the act of sharing dreams and hopes. You know the pillow talks, star gazing, talking about fantasies, what could be fun, what could be exciting, that some-day talk can bring couples together. Just the act of sharing your dreams with your partner, confiding those. That's definitely a way to enhance the relationship.

And then talking about more day to day practical things. I would say to remember to make love a habit, just like brushing your teeth, taking a shower, feeding your dog. Love is a feeling. We all know that we think of love as a feeling, but it's actually a habit. That means we can act in little ways that can make our partner feel good. We can make eye contact. We can bring them breakfast in bed. We can rub their shoulders. We can ask them about their day,

and we can really, really listen to their answer. And those are ways we can nurture the relationship.

Scott: So for the couple that is pillow talking, and they're sharing visions of the future together, setting up goals, working as a team in this new year, what positive effects do you see couples like that experiencing when they're actually able to make and keep these resolutions together?

Dr. Orenstein: They can have more fun, so it's the exact same thing that we do when I see individuals in private practice who are depressed. We know that there's research that when people plan pleasurable activities, they plan them, they put them on the calendar, and they go out that their mood is going to improve, and that is a treatment for depression.

Well, I think couples can get depressed, too. It can get boring and kind of gray and dull. So, if they plan activities together, it gives them something to look forward to. It gives them shared experience.

So, for instance, this year, one of my resolutions with my husband was to get out more on the weekends. I noticed last year that the weekends could get really long, and I would be watching lots of Netflix on my own computer and wanted to get a little more excitement.

And so, I looked online a little the last few weeks for plays in the area, shows, movies, and went ahead and bought a couple of tickets for some really fun show in January and in March. And I'm already really looking forward to that. I sent him an email. I shared that. And so, you wonder "Gosh, getting play tickets helps your marriage," but it really does. It puts me in a better mood. It gives him something fun. The other piece is I'm more likely to do it.

So, last year, if there was a play, if we wanted to do something and it would be about 2:00 in the afternoon on a Saturday, and he'd look in the Independence, that's our paper with cultural activities, and he would mention a few things. We would call one of the theaters and the tickets would be sold out. That's generally what would happen, or we just didn't feel like doing it. But now, we've already kind of taken that first step and second and we're going. That's one example of sharing a goal together that can get you in a better mood and get you out of the house and having fun together.

Scott: That's great planning that. And I'm so glad you brought up the point about it being a new year and how exciting it can be that way because we don't want to just take the time to focus our resolutions on ourselves, being selfish, but on our relationships as well. So, is there anything else that our listeners, or myself, should know that might help us be successful this year in our endeavors to put some excitement back in our relationships?

Dr. Orenstein: I love these questions, and I know that when people talk about their goals and they plan, there's some research that that makes people feel optimistic and in a better mood. So, I really want people to do this because I know it can work.

However, there's one caveat, and that is whatever plans you have, you have to expect some mishaps and bad experiences, and that doesn't mean you should call off the plans.

So, for instance, if my husband and I go to a play this month, and it's just horrible, and we walk out in the middle, that doesn't mean we should never do this again. As a matter of fact, some of our funniest experiences is trying to sneak out of plays or concerts that we don't like.

And the funny thing is, you really remember those as a couple. You can remember, and so I'm not advocating negative experiences. Don't go get tickets to something you don't think you'll like, but just kind of hang in there and know every experience isn't going to be a ten over ten, and that doesn't mean that it's not worth doing with you and your partner. Whether that's, you know, taking tennis lessons together or going out to dinner. You know there's going to be a rainy day or a bad meal or bad service at a restaurant. Just kind of go with it and look at the bigger picture of sharing time with your partner.

Scott: Such great information. Susan, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Dr. Orenstein: Oh, thank you, Scott. It was my pleasure. Happy New Year.

Scott: To find out more about Dr. Orenstein and her practice Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com or 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 previous episodes visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

Narrator: 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.