

Stay Happily Married.com
Episode 2
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“How to Stay Happily Married on Valentine’s Day”

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

Lee Rosen: Hi. I'm Lee Rosen. I'm so excited that you could join us today. We're going to spend the next few minutes listening to 10 of America's leading marriage counselors, all of whom are coming to us with their top tip on how to make this the best Valentine's Day ever. And more than that, they're really giving us advice on how to make our marriages and our relationships work, because you know Valentine's Day is just that one special day a year that's all about love. Really in our marriages and our relationships, every day ought to be special and we ought to be spending a lot of energy doing what we can to make it work. So thanks so much for joining us. This is a special feature from StayHappilyMarried.com and I hope you get a lot out of the next few minutes.

Tip number 10 comes to us from Sandra Dopf, a certified master level life coach. Sandra practices in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Sandra Dopf: Thanks for asking me to be a part of this interview. This is exciting to get to talk about tips for couples staying happily married. What a great time to think about that, during Valentine's Day, thinking of kind of a love picture for all of us.

The tip for Valentine's Day is on that day we often choose our mate. We choose to do something special for them and we have many ways of doing that, as we've talked about, through dinners and candles and cards. But another way is the fact that we just choose our mate all over that day and we get the chance to choose our mate each day. But I'm excited that couples that do choose each other on Valentine's Day and make days like that special, it's a way of saying that when you walk in this room I would choose you all over again to be married to you.

And I think that's a powerful tip, not only for Valentine's Day but for everyday all year long. You're saying that my words become my actions and I'm going to really think about my words. And that actually even begins further back with my thoughts. So on Valentine's Day and each day my thoughts are choosing my mate, my words are choosing my mate, and my actions are choosing my mate. Have a great Valentine's Day. Choose your mate, speak words of life into them, and have a happy, happy marriage.

Lee Rosen: Oh, that's a good one. And now tip number 9 is from Jennifer Coleman. Jennifer is a licensed professional counselor with a background in marriage and family therapy. She practices with our law firm, Rosen Law Firm, in Raleigh and in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Jennifer Coleman: One thing that can be fun to do to commemorate a special occasion like Valentine's Day with your significant other is to present them with some sort of I.O.U. You could get really fancy with it. You could make a certificate or type something on your computer, or you could just tell them about it or make them a card; but the idea is basically that you would complete some kind of service for them, something that you know they would really appreciate.

And so there's two kinds of ways that you could go with it and one way is something the two of you would enjoy together, like you cook them a special meal and then you have that special dinner together; or you give them a coupon for an hour long massage, which of course would involve the two of you. Or it might be something that your partner really hates doing on their own but really wants done. An example of that in my life, one year my husband for my birthday detailed my car. I hate to clean my car but I also really don't like riding around in a dirty car and he knew that, so he detailed the car and that was his present to me was a certificate that I was going to get my car detailed and then the next weekend he was out all day on Saturday doing it.

So those are two different ways. You could write an I.O.U. for your significant other at Valentine's Day and hopefully they really appreciate it.

Lee Rosen: I've done that one and I especially like it when it doesn't cost any money. Tip number 8 is going to be from Dr. Patricia Hogan. Dr. Hogan is a clinical psychologist who practices in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Dr. Patricia Hogan: There tends to be a lot of emphasis on concrete gifts on Valentine's Day, and it's fun to give and receive special treats but it's equally important, if not more so, to express your gratitude to your husband or wife for who they are as a person and what they mean in your life. Valentine's Day would be a great day to start a new tradition in your relationship.

You might have heard of the idea of keeping a gratitude journal where you take a few minutes a day to reflect and write down several things you're grateful for that day. How about doing that as a couple? Sit down together with a notepad or a binder and take turns writing down what you're grateful for about your partner. You could put the date at the top and start with the root phrase "I am grateful that you..." and finish that sentence three or four times. After you've each done that, read your appreciations to each other. Think of thoughtful gestures that they've made, like bringing in the paper or calling to check in with you during the day or maybe just giving you a random hug, the kinds of day-to-day things that we tend to start taking for granted after a while.

Also, think about qualities that you like about them as a person, like your gratitude for their kindness to your family, or knowing you can count on them to be there when you're sad or need support. Ideally you could do this exercise every day or at least on some regular basis. It's always nice to hear that you're appreciated and at the same time it's good to be reminded of the things we value in our husbands and wives when it's so easy to focus on the things we don't like so much.

It can be enlightening to revisit your list now and then and remind yourself of all that you have to be grateful for. And when you take the time to create a positive environment in your home it makes it easier to hear each other and to deal with problems when they do come up.

Lee Rosen: Tip number 7 comes to us from Dr. Kathleen Connolly. She's a licensed counselor who practices in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Dr. Kathleen Connolly: It's likely that you'll be purchasing a Valentine's Day card for your spouse. How about putting one in the mail as a surprise for him or her? Buy an extra card other than the one you might give directly, or if you're creative make one, and send it to the house or to the office. This will be a big surprise this year.

Lee Rosen: I have to agree with her. I always like it when I get a surprise. It makes a big difference and I think when it's a surprise it probably means two or three times more than when it's expected. The 6th tip on our list is brought to us by Dr. Robert Abramowitz. He's a licensed psychologist who practices in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Dr. Robert Abramowitz: One of the keys to a successful marriage is ongoing, regular contact. Valentine's Day is a great time to begin a regular connection between a husband and wife that they can continue afterwards. Most husbands and wives get so busy with work and childcare that they sometimes go long periods of time without talking together.

I recommend to all couples that they make a special time for each other on a daily basis. If you have young children, you'll have to wait until they get to bed. Or if one or both are away for business it may have to take place by phone. As children age this should get easier. I especially like it when a couple can take a daily walk together, walking the dog or just getting some air. Another common scenario is sharing a cup of coffee or a glass of wine at the end of the day.

I suggest that the conversation begin with a basic question like, "How are you doing?" or "What's on your mind?" If each party can ask each other and talk to each other on those lines, a daily talk of 20 minutes is a chance to stay connected to provide support and stay close. And Valentine's Day is a great time to start this.

Lee Rosen: Now, rounding out the first half of our list is Donna Moore. Donna practices in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's a licensed clinical social worker. Here's tip number 5.

Donna Moore: Valentine's Day is a way to let the person that you care about, who is special in your life, know it. And some different ways that you could do that is you could tuck away notes expressing how you feel or your thoughts. You can put them in the kitchen next to the coffee pot. You can surprise them next to your toothbrush. Places you know they'll find them such as the steering wheel when they get in the car to go to work.

Alternatively, you may want to learn how to say "I love you" in a few different languages. Try Italian, French, Spanish; they can be very romantic and it also shows that you've taken a few moments to do something different to let them know how much you care.

Lee Rosen: Now it's time for tip number 4 and it comes from Barbara Keyworth. Barbara is a marital therapist in Raleigh, North Carolina. Tip number 4.

Barbara Keyworth: Valentine's is great fun, but it's really pretty simple. I mean, all you really have to do is buy each other some sort of a simple, thoughtful gift like chocolates, or maybe a card and chocolates.

But if you really want to make your relationship better and have more closeness and intimacy and romance, you need to commit to working on the difficult parts of a relationship. Those parts are really how to talk and listen to each other, which takes a lot of patience and understanding. I see couples desperately trying to get through to each other. Neither person is really listening to what the other person is saying or trying to work out a solution. They get polarized and argue back and forth.

So for Valentine's if you want to make things better, you start by thinking about what really matters to you, and then you talk to your partner about this. That's the first thing.

Then the second thing you need to do is listen very intently and seriously to what matters to him or to her. This will give you the chance, the opportunity, to start finding a way to negotiate and maybe come up with a solution that will work for both of you, especially if you have really big differences. Now, if you don't do this step you could end up with a lot of underlying resentment. Or, if you just go along with the other person to keep them happy, then over time you're going to build up resentment and then you're going to be eroding the trust that's in the relationship.

So will you find out that you have some major differences? Yes, and you will probably have some conflicts. But learning how to resolve the conflicts in a thoughtful way is really the basis of your friendship and that is also the basis of romance.

One thing you can really watch for is, is there a great difference or disparity in how you divide up responsibilities, because a relationship is about sharing responsibilities as well as fun. Let me give you a couple of examples. I had a husband come in who had actually read two or three books on self-help, how to make his marriage better. And he's been asking his wife to please read some of the books and she just kept saying no. Also had a couple come in where the woman was not only working a full time job, like her husband, but she also was doing almost all of the chores at home and she had been asking him repeatedly to do his fair share and then of course was ending up yelling at him about things.

So these things are hard to work on. They're complicated, they take a lot of patience, they take a lot of time, and you have to do some soul searching. But it's well worth it to put this effort in.

So for this Valentine's if you want to have more romance then sign up for doing the hard stuff. The easy part is really easy and the hard part is about character and trust and friendship. And it definitely helps with the romance.

Lee Rosen: Dr. Susan Orenstein, who practices in Cary, North Carolina, specializes in relationship issues and she's going to bring us the 3rd tip on our countdown.

Dr. Susan Orenstein: The tip I came up with that I thought would be really special is for couples to make special time just for each other on Valentine's Day and that would mean time that would be light and fun and doing something that they both enjoy. So cleaning the house wouldn't count unless both of them really thought that was super-fun. Visiting family, taking care of kids, doing taxes, none of that would count.

What I'm talking about is really finding time to do something that both people would enjoy that would be entertaining, that would be relaxing, that would just be fun. So folks who have babies, who have kids, if for some reason they can't find childcare that day then maybe making a coupon or card saying that you're going to give that special time to each other when you can find childcare in the near future would be a way to secure that.

It could be fun for couples to think about things that they used to do that were fun. And sometimes when couples are first just getting to know each other they have fun doing simple things like going for walks, going for coffee, for lunch, going to a movie, something that doesn't take too much time or planning, that's just relaxing.

For a lot of couples, once they're married and if they have kids things aren't as simple any more so sometimes a change of scenery, getting out of the house, would make a difference so that they're not surrounded by laundry and bills, anything like that, but just totally a new environment, a different environment.

Lee Rosen: We're getting close to the end. This time it's Dr. Michael Hall. He specializes in couples counseling in Charlotte, North Carolina and he brings us the number 2 tip on our list.

Dr. Michael Hall: To give a gift that is really heartfelt you have to know your spouse's heart. And by that it means what most makes your spouse feel loved by you. You have to learn your spouse's preferred style for intimate communication.

You might want to consider something that Dr. Gary Chapman, who is a marriage educator, put out for couples to consider. He talks about five love languages and said that most people can speak one of these "heart" languages, or love languages: number one, words of affirmation; number two, acts of service; number three, quality time; number four, receiving gifts; and number five, physical touch.

I know you think, "Oh, that's an easy one. I know what my spouse's love language is." Before you start to act on that why don't you check it out? One of the best ways to validate what your spouse's love language is, is what I call "complaint analysis." What does your mate request most of you? And when I say "request" you can read "complain." What do they complain most about? Take five minutes, make your laundry list of your spouse's 10 chief complaints. Just put at the top "10 chief complaints." Write them down. Now it's important that you be brutally honest.

Why is this so helpful? When all things are equal, complaints -- also known as spousal nagging - - can be translated into that's their way of saying, "I need you to switch your language. I need you to take a different approach to telling me that I matter most to you." So look at that

complaint list and see if most of what they ask for has to do with spending time together; that's quality time. Or that they want you to do more things that single them out, maybe acts of service. Or they do like to receive things that they can put their hands on or see, receiving gifts. Maybe they ask for more touch-time, more physical touch. Or maybe they ask to be affirmed more.

So look for that pattern and then pick one activity that you can do each day the week of Valentine's week and then watch your spouse light up when they respond to the fact that you speak their heart language.

Lee Rosen: Now, topping off our list of tips on how to stay happily married on Valentine's Day is Amanda Hardenbrook. Amanda is a licensed professional counselor and she practices in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Amanda Hardenbrook: Create a book for your partner that includes about five special memories that were important to the two of you. It can include stories about those memories, it can also include photographs, but most of importantly it needs to include why those times were special to you.

It's useful for two reasons. First of all, the person who's creating the book is actually taking the time to remember those moments, which is easy to forget in our day-to-day lives. It's just easy to say, "Wow, this is my life," day in, day out.

The second reason I think that it's important is because the person receiving the book will get several messages. First of all, that you remember those times, which I think is key. Second of all, that you took the time to make something for them. And then third of all, by sharing your feelings in the book about why that was special to you, you're allowing them to connect emotionally to you and so you've taken the time to share that feeling with them; they may feel more likely to share a feeling with you back.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Ten great tips from 10 great counselors, people that spend all day, every day, helping couples work through the difficulties in their relationships. I hope that you've learned something that will help you not only to have a great Valentine's Day but to really enhance your marriage. This is not a sprint; it's a marathon and we're all in it for the long haul.

I hope you've gotten a lot out of today and I'm sure that using our website, StayHappilyMarried.com, can help you even more. We're always adding new material to the site and we hope to see you there. Thanks so much for joining us.

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