

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Emotional Intimacy Vs. Sexual Intimacy

This is Episode number 19 of Stay Happily Married, "Emotional Intimacy Vs. Sexual Intimacy."

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

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Lee Rosen: Hello. Welcome to the show. I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. I'm here with Dr. Debbie Neel, a licensed psychologist, certified health services provided, certified sex therapist. Now, Dr. Neel has been on the program in the past and I hope you will enjoy this episode. And if you do, I would love for you to go back and visit her earlier episode because she offered some very interesting and valuable advice. We will of course put a link in the show notes for this program back to the earlier program as well.

Dr. Neel specializes in both individual and couples therapy and she also does a lot of work in the area of adult attention deficit disorder. Welcome to the show, Debbie.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad that you could be with us today. I very much enjoyed your being with us last time and I feel like there are a lot of important things that you have to say and a lot of important things for those that are listening to our program to hear. This whole topic of emotional intimacy versus sexual intimacy is awfully important.

Now, last time that you were with us you talked about how love and desire change over the course of a marriage and how couples can be

prepared for the inevitable waning of the romance that sort of permeates a relationship at first. I guess that first -- the beginning of the relationship is really hot times and things are off to a big start. And things change and mature and you really helped us, I think, to understand a lot about how relationships change and what that does.

Today I'd like to shift gears a little bit and really talk about this whole idea of emotional intimacy versus sexual intimacy. So I guess a great place to start is what is the difference between emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy? What are we talking about?

Dr. Debbie Neel: In many ways I think they are hard to separate out so I'd just like to start by saying that it's the integration of emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy that are needed for the feeling of a satisfied marriage and a healthy, strong marriage. But emotional intimacy, that's feeling close and connected and valued. It's being known by your mate and also knowing them, appreciating their emotional needs, their psychological needs.

And we can have emotionally close relationships with friends and family, siblings, mentors; but with our mate we really want to develop that emotional intimacy where there is that really private -- or what I call that holy ground, that sacred ground -- of knowing one another and respecting one another and unconditional acceptance.

Our mates are going to have some bad habits -- at least bad habits that we view as bad. They're going to have some quirks. But emotional intimacy is saying, "I love you just the way that you are. I accept that I appreciate you accepting those quirks about myself."

Lee Rosen: So emotional intimacy is really I guess understanding the other person at a very deep -- who they really are, what they're all about. Is that a --?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Dr. Debbie Neel: That's the good, bad, and the ugly about a person and that knowingness.

Lee Rosen: Now, sexual intimacy, what are we talking about exactly?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Well, that requires an openness and a comfort and that ability to share our bodies with one another. In many ways it's a culmination

of coming together and communicating our love with not necessarily words. And it requires a lot of unconditional acceptance there too.

As I've mentioned, I've been married 27 years. I don't know about you in your marriage, but my body has changed over the years. It might not be the body that my husband chose to marry.

Lee Rosen: Mine just gets better and better.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Sometimes mine's better and sometimes mine's worse.

Lee Rosen: Right. But definitely we're changing.

Dr. Debbie Neel: But you know that a few pounds here and there, or a roll that was once firm, it's that comfort with "I love all of you." And even being able to say to one's mate, "I really don't like how I look" -- and of course I'm going to talk about these things, Lee, because body image is a problem for all women.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Right. Well, we do hear about it.

Dr. Debbie Neel: So if husbands understand things that really don't matter to them at all really do matter to their wife, that they'll help her along with that in terms of sexual intimacy. And as men age, maybe arousal is not going to be quite so easy for them. Biologically that should be the case.

Lee Rosen: Right. Bodies are changing.

Dr. Debbie Neel: And to be able to say, "This is what is going on in my body," a lot of times couples don't talk about these things and then there can be emotional conflict because they think something's wrong. "Well, she's not attracted to me anymore because she's not getting as aroused as quickly or in the same way." So sexual intimacy, it's really sharing in just a total way, in a comfortable way, and being accepted.

Lee Rosen: So do you think -- it's like we have stereotypes because so often they are true. But I wonder when we look at emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy do men tend to blur that distinction? Does everybody tend to blur it? But I would think a lot of guys would really think that if everything's okay sexually, everything's okay emotionally and that all of this becomes kind of a mushy mish-mash of thoughts.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Again we're going to talk in generalities and stereotypes, but it can be the reverse. But I will talk about -- women are wired biologically to be the more emotional in the sense that they're more emotionally aware of their feelings. And men tend to view connection more from a physical point.

So men connect physically which opens up their heart and soul. And really it's in the afterglow -- the after play of sex -- that men are going to be most open and vulnerable to expressing their emotionality.

Women, on the other hand, come from an emotional aspect. "Make love to my heart first. Tell me how beautiful I am or notice the things that I've done for you, whether rub your back or fix your dinner," or whatever. Or, "How are my feelings? Am I a wreck because I've taken care of kids all day or I've worked?" And then as the conversation and the emotional connection opens up our hearts and souls that we more freely are able to give our physical self in trust.

So we have this very complex task. We're coming from opposite directions to get to the same place. So many couples, not realizing that, and early on in romantic love everything tends to be real easy physically -- not all the time, but overall -- that as women need more of the emotional connection there can be this feeling of "we're not in love anymore" or "sex is not working" when it's really a gender difference.

Lee Rosen: Right. Is it the norm or the exception for husbands and wives to have lots of thoughts about the emotional intimacy or the sexual intimacy that are not being expressed in the marriage? Are they running a constant review of their emotional and physical -- or sexual -- intimacy and not really revealing what they have to say? Does that make sense? Do they have secrets about what their thoughts are about their spouse that they don't really express in a big way in the marriage?

Dr. Debbie Neel: That's a huge question. I'm going to try to simplify it and it may not be exactly what you want.

But men tend to have more sexual thoughts. So in terms of secret thoughts and ideas I frequently ask men in my office, "How frequently do you think about sex in a day?" And it's not uncommon for them to say, "Well, can I just narrow it down to an hour?"

And I can ask a woman, "How many sexual thoughts do you have in day?" And she says, "Well, can I tell you how many in a week?"

So do we want to call those secrets? It's just how we're wired. For couples to understand that -- this is why I talk with men and say, "Chances are you're going to be the one to initiate sex. She doesn't think about it."

In terms of emotion you'll hear women say, "He just doesn't sit and talk to me."

Lee Rosen: Right. That track is running in her brain.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Because that's the way she's wired. "He must not love me because he's not asking me how my day is and how I feel."

Lee Rosen: Right. And that's really what I'm -- so there's constant sort of self-talk. I mean, I think we all talk to ourselves about ourselves, but we're also talking to ourselves about our relationships and the things that we are pleased with or not pleased with about what's going on with our partner. Whether it's that emotional intimacy or the sexual intimacy, we sort of have an agenda that may not be coming out. Do you bring out that agenda in your process with people that you're seeing?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Well, I talk about these differences for starters. And then we move to what to do about that. So it's not uncommon for me to assign homework assignments such as a sexual date or an emotional date. Sometimes I will have couples write down their fantasy lovemaking. One recently, this woman brought hers in -- and sometimes they bring them in and sometimes they don't. Again, this is just such a personal aspect of ourselves.

This woman brought in her fantasy and I was reading it and her fantasy of lovemaking -- this is what is erotic and it's going to set the stage -- the family getting up on Saturday morning and having a big breakfast and taking the kids to the park and having a ball game and --

After reading this fantasy -- and her husband was sitting there; I thought he was going to go to sleep.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'm thinking, "When's the good part?" What happens at the park?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Well, we've got the kids and the dog with us, remember.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's not sounding good.

Dr. Debbie Neel: You know, I said, "Gosh, there's not a body part in here." But if I have a husband to write down fantasy --

Lee Rosen: Right. There's no park involved.

Dr. Debbie Neel: There's no park. There may or may not be a romantic dinner with violin and candle lights. It's more that sexy lingerie and body parts. So if we know that, that it's how men are wired and how women are wired, women are not intentionally neglecting their husbands. Husbands are not intentionally objectifying their wives.

Lee Rosen: It just feels that way.

Dr. Debbie Neel: But, going back to "are these secret thoughts?" so they're not secret thoughts. I think it's lack of education.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes a lot of sense. And I think when you're uneducated you don't know what's okay to express and what's not and you sort of dig yourself deeper and deeper into your own personal hole in the relationship, which his not good.

What I wonder about, some people -- the whole idea of being a couple, of being together, of not disrupting the relationship -- I see people that I feel like are really losing their sense of individuality and they're afraid to jeopardize that sense of togetherness. Are there people that are just afraid to raise these issues because they don't want to rock the boat?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Absolutely. That we get confused about what intimacy is and that intimacy means agreeing all the time. So we have this sense of we-ness and everything is good and then it may be, "I want to go to this restaurant. You want to go to that restaurant," and a lot of acquiescing because not wanting to rock the boat. And either the husband or the wife can begin to feel losing a sense of self, that I always have to be who my mate wants me to be in order for us to be close. And in fact that in and of itself is false intimacy because it's not the real you. Yes, that can certainly create a problem.

Lee Rosen: Now, what about the other extreme? So you have people that are overly concerned about the whole idea of their togetherness. What about you have people that are very protective of their individuality, that they don't want to really open up to their spouses because they want to keep who they are separate from the marriage. What's that like?

Dr. Debbie Neel: In many ways it plays out similar to the other in that there is in fact an overall disconnect, even if there is a sense of we-ness. It may not

be rocking the boat, but someone can just be silent because many they grew up in a family where you always had to mask the best foot forward -- "Everything is okay with me" -- and not being willing to be vulnerable to say, "I'm really scared. My boss may come down on me today because I didn't do this or this." And it can create a sense of power of one person withholding and the other person not withholding.

It doesn't start, I don't believe, from an intentional out to get one's mate. So frequently I see just dynamics of families of origin or gender differences or temperament that get misunderstood in marriage that create the divisiveness of "we will either agree on everything," or "I'm so scared I'll just become engulfed in giving myself to you I really don't give anything to you."

And so we can have false emotional intimacy and we can have false sexual intimacy, that although you hear me talking about that they need to be intertwined and that's what makes the marriage so special, that there are couples that can sexually perform but they're really not grasping the entire utopia that can be experienced in the sexual experience because they're going after one dimension. They're going after a physical buzz.

Lee Rosen: Right. So it's almost like they're playing a part in a movie but not really getting all they could get out of their lives.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very interesting. It sounds to me like a lot of what you're doing to help people is showing them parts of themselves that they may not -- either they didn't know were there or they didn't understand why they are the way they are. When you talk about families of origin, it's like we grow up, we are who we are, and we behave the way we behave many times I think because it just never occurred to us that there was an alternative.

Dr. Debbie Neel: We tend to rely on the parent model and there may not be two parents in the home. There may be a very dysfunctional marriage or alcohol was -- just any number of things that I try to give labels to what people are saying so that they know what's going on and then to help them understand that's just the way it is. Now, if we can define the wife and define the husband, then the two of them have a much better chance of negotiating what's comfortable and what's not.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, it's complicated enough with just yourself, but then you throw yourself into the marriage and things get mixed up. That's very interesting.

So when you bring people together into your office -- and obviously they're not there unless they're worried about things and they're willing to do something about it, I guess, or they wouldn't show up - - well, let me ask you this. First question is, is it more common that one spouse or the other is willing to come; wives more willingly or husbands more willingly? Or do most of the people that they see, they come together and they're all ready to go?

Dr. Debbie Neel: One partner is going to be more interested than the other. And I'm not sure that -- for my practice I'm not sure that goes across gender lines like it's all husbands or all wives. Probably usually the higher desire partner is going to initiate contact with me. However, there are a lot of women not understanding sexual desire and interest, feel so inept and dysfunctional and flawed that a lower desire wife will make contact wanting to know what's wrong.

So one of the first questions I may ask is -- she may come in and say, "I'm just never interested in sex." And I ask about frequency of lovemaking and then I ask about her enjoyment with sex. And she says, "Oh, once I get into it I'm fine."

And I say, "What's the problem?" If we understand that men typically have more of a primary or assertive desire -- now, that can also be women, I don't want to get too stereotypic -- and the lower desire partner may simply be someone that is secondary or receptive in their form of desire.

Lee Rosen: Right. You're an expert. Are you able to tell us what's reasonable? When do we need to come to see you? In a week? What should we be expecting before we call your number, which I will give in a few minutes? Like this woman says she's not interested. And you're thinking, "You're normal. You're doing what you're supposed to do." What is reasonable? And then I want you to write this down so I can take it home.

Dr. Debbie Neel: It's when it creates discomfort in the relationship. And I want to use the term "discomfort" rather than "dissatisfaction" or "conflict" because things are harder to deal with when we get to the conflict level. But if there's discomfort of it just doesn't seem to be the way I'd like it to be, then we're going to be able to have a much shorter time when they're involved with me. It's going to be much more coaching that -- when to come in. When you have questions.

So much of it from my perspective is understanding receptive desire and primary desire and all the emotions that go along with that. And that we can disagree about how to parent the kids and still enjoy our sexual intimacy. It's hanging onto our individuality.

Many theorist authors say the things we disagreed about when we were dating, when we first got married, we'll be disagreeing about when we die. It's how to disagree well and how to negotiate that. It's very complex, the question that you ask of what brings people in and why. They may not know it's a sexual issue. Many couples may come in saying, "We want sex therapy," and we have to drop back and talk about their communication.

Lee Rosen: Right. Because you're getting at what's really going on.

Dr. Debbie Neel: And they come in blaming the other, so the first education I guess I try to accomplish is sex is a team sport. So this is not about either one of you; it's about negotiating your sexual rhythm. By rhythm I mean frequency and behaviors that each are comfortable with and maintaining that sense of self-respect other-respect. And you have to be playful. You cannot be anxious having sex. You have to be able to laugh.

And I like what Barry McCarthy says, that 5 to 15 percent of sexual experiences are going to be mediocre or failures. So when a couple comes to one another and let's say just is not working, just look at each other. Instead of getting all upset about ourselves or about our mate, go, "Okay, we're getting the percentages out of the way."

Lee Rosen: That's right. From here on out it'll all be fine; we've knocked those down.

Dr. Debbie Neel: So if you have two failed experiences in a row, okay, so you're not --

Lee Rosen: You're scheduled for 10 or 12 good ones, right?

Dr. Debbie Neel: Exactly. That we can get discouraged too quickly. But if we know things like that are normal, that that's where the emotional intimacy and the sexual intimacy can intertwine and really build us up to be able to look at each other and laugh and go, "Well, I guess that time didn't work. I can't wait until the next."

Lee Rosen: Right. It really sounds like a tremendous amount of what you do to help people is education. It's fascinating because I think of myself as a fairly knowledgeable person, but many of the things that you have said during this show and during the previous show are things that really -- I don't feel like as an average person reading the

newspapers and magazines and books and watching TV they're things that we just don't learn, that don't get talked about. I feel like you know things and are able to verbalize things that we don't even know the issues that are on the table.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Lee, I think if you reflect on your marriage, on marriages of your friends, that the things that I've said go, "Oh, yeah." So really, I'm not even educating as much as I am acknowledging and giving labels. Because you do have this education, this knowledge; you just didn't know what to do with it.

Lee Rosen: Right. And we don't connect the dots well. But it does seem to me that coming and talking to you, in many respects -- my gut reaction is almost that most people ought to come and sit down with you and learn about these things because if you're not having trouble at the moment you will have trouble if you don't learn this stuff. And these are the things that I think head off trouble.

Dr. Debbie Neel: That really is my belief, that if we had premarital classes about this or early marriage mentoring classes about this, that we could prevent a whole lot.

Lee Rosen: Right. I didn't go to any kind of pre-marriage counseling sort of things that many churches now offer or private practitioners offer. Is this at all discussed in some of these -- for instance, we have a co-worker here that just went through the Catholic Church's pre-marriage process. Are these topics we're talking about, is it out there at all in these programs?

Dr. Debbie Neel: It's beginning to be. As I realize from my own life, as well as for those of my clients, that this was the issue, I approached a church here in town about doing a 10-week Bible study on sex. That went over.

Lee Rosen: Right. Really well.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Well, they thought about it and Providence Baptist Church allowed me to teach a 10 to 12 week class with couples on enhancing one's marriage. And this was a study of the book *Celebration of Sex*. Through that process I taught it two more years and we developed a guide book so that couples can go through a guide book and have homework assignments. They read Doug Rosenau's book *Celebration of Sex*. Then there's the guide book that has the questions that really allow you to go in and know yourself and then allow time for you to discuss that with your mate.

So it can be a self-guided study. I have found it to be very comfortable to teach in groups of 20 couples. And the retention rate has been shockingly wonderful.

Lee Rosen: Oh, yeah. We'd keep coming back for that program.

Dr. Debbie Neel: There are some people that discontinue because of the discomfort. And my approach is, if we can watch what we do at the movies, why can't we talk about this in groups?

Lee Rosen: And then there's the homework. I wouldn't want to miss the next assignment, unless it meant I had to go to the museum.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Well, we don't discuss a lot of the homework in class. The homework, couples need to pick and choose where they are in their growth and in their relationship. They don't have to do every single homework assignment, but it will help them identify where they are and where their marriage can grow. We've had couples participate in this that have been married two months and 37 years.

Lee Rosen: Right. The whole range.

Dr. Debbie Neel: The whole gamut.

Lee Rosen: Well, I do feel like learning about emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy really does open up possibilities; and if you're stuck, obviously having professional help. But even if you're not stuck, I think learning from someone like you makes a lot of sense.

Dr. Debbie Neel, I very much appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much.

Dr. Debbie Neel: Thanks for letting me come.

Lee Rosen: And thank you for listening. I really appreciate you joining us and I hope that you're taking away some knowledge and information that may be of use to you. If you'd like more information about this topic you can contact Dr. Debbie Neel. She has a website at atriumphsychology.com, or you can reach her by telephone at (919) 781-8810. We will of course put a link to her site and the phone number in our show notes so you can check them there at stayhappilymarried.com.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you will join us again next week. If you would like to leave a comment, we would love to hear it. We have a listener comment line at (919) 256-3083,

or feel free to send us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.
Until next week, stay happily married.

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