

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.



Your First Visit

This is Episode number 27 of Stay Happily Married, "Your First Visit."

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

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here in the studio in Raleigh, North Carolina and I have with me by telephone Sonyia Richardson. She is a licensed clinical social worker in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sonyia, how are you today?

Sonyia Richardson: I'm great.

Lee Rosen: Good. I'm glad you could be with us. Now, I think folks are always curious when we're talking about staying married to hear about whether the person we're talking to is managing to stay married. My understanding is that you have been married for about seven years, is that right?

Sonyia Richardson: That's correct.

Lee Rosen: Whole time one person, right?

Sonyia Richardson: Of course.

Lee Rosen: Now, do you guys have any kids?

Sonyia Richardson: We have two children, 7 and 4.

Lee Rosen: 7 and 4, okay. Those are good ages.

Sonyia Richardson: They are.

Lee Rosen: I have an 11-year-old and 14-year-old and those are not always good ages.

Sonyia Richardson: Oh, no.

Lee Rosen: Everything presents challenges and opportunities. But I'm really curious to hear from you and talk about your first visit. I think that's a topic that a lot of folks are very interested in because we're all wondering what happens the first time that we go and talk to a counselor. Now, your practice is called Another Level Counseling which really I think is described as sort of a community-based approach to decreasing the stigma associated with receiving marriage counseling services, and that's what we really need to talk about today.

Let me ask you right off the bat, you feel like there really is a stigma even for marriage counseling?

Sonyia Richardson: Absolutely. There is a stigma associated with marriage counseling. And what we're finding is that as far, as pre-marital counseling, individuals are a lot more comfortable saying that they're going for pre-marital counseling. But when it actually comes to marriage counseling, being in a marriage, maybe after a couple years, feeling that you need to go in and speak with someone, there's a little more stigma associated with it.

Lee Rosen: Everyone's worried that everyone will think they're failing, I guess.

Sonyia Richardson: Absolutely. Although the stigma's not there prior to marriage when you're going for pre-marital counseling. So we're trying to do some work in decreasing that stigma and allowing people to understand that marriage counseling doesn't mean your marriage failed. It means that you are totally committed to having a successful marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you have been providing therapy and counseling now for how long?

Sonyia Richardson: It's been about six years.

Lee Rosen: So I guess you've really seen a whole range of couples, from people who really are in trouble, that their marriage really is struggling, to it sounds like people that are not in trouble at all but do really want their marriage to be better than it is already.

Sonyia Richardson: Yes. Luckily I see a little bit of both. I get that mixture. So I have some couples who come in who are presenting as if they're having

more serious marital concerns, and then I also have some couples who are the very beginning stages and trying to determine how to unify their marriage and make things just a little bit stronger right in the very beginning stages.

Lee Rosen: So you call your practice in Charlotte, you call it Another Level Counseling. Is that because folks are trying to get to the next, better level? Is that sort of where that name comes from?

Sonya Richardson: It is, absolutely. And my goal is to help elevate them and take them to that next level within their marriage, and improving communication, improving intimacy, understanding values as it relates to their background -- family background. So my goal is when each client or each couple comes into my office, my goal is to elevate them and take them to another level in their thinking.

Lee Rosen: Well, one reason I think -- and it may just be me -- but I think there's a stigma about coming to see you guys is there's a lot of mystery. We have no idea what's going to happen behind closed doors in your office. You scare us, and we know you know what we're thinking and so that's troubling. So I'm hoping that you and I can demystify what goes on in that first visit so that it isn't maybe as frightening and mysterious as it seems like it is. Can you help us with that?

Sonya Richardson: Absolutely. As far as your first visit, what typically happens is someone will initiate the phone call and it's usually the person in the marriage who's a little bit more comfortable calling to schedule a counseling appointment. And so that person will call the office. They will indicate that they're wanting couples or marital counseling. And at that time we will gather just some very basic information -- insurance information if they have insurance, or if they're privately paying. We'll also want to know what time of day they would want their appointment, when to schedule it. And so it's just very basic demographic information for the first phone call. So there's no reason to be very much feared with the first phone call.

As far as coming in for your first visit, what typically happens is the first 10 minutes the couple will be filling out paperwork and the forms again, have very basic demographic information. There will be a couple of questions that will ask to assess their marriage on paper. We will also collect any information as far as insurance and then they'll be signing confidentiality forms and just healthcare privacy act forms. So you're going through the basic paperwork. So the first 10 minutes shouldn't be very intimidating either because it's just basic paperwork.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you mentioned insurance and I'm very curious about it. Are insurance companies pretty willing to pay for marriage counseling?

Sonyia Richardson: They are. Insurance companies typically will cover the marriage counseling sessions. What we typically do is put the insurance under one of the couple's names. So one couple will be the primary carrier of the insurance and the insurance be filed under their name.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So we make this phone call, you set an appointment. How long does it usually take to get in for an -- is it the next day or is it weeks and weeks?

Sonyia Richardson: It usually depends. If we have cancellations we may be able to get you in a little sooner, but it can be anywhere from one to three or four weeks depending on how busy the practitioner is.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you get in for the appointment. You come in and you meet the practitioner. You're going to spend about 10 minutes, you say, filling out forms and stuff. Then you get down to business?

Sonyia Richardson: Then we get down to business. The couple will come back to the office and the first couple of minutes the therapist is just telling them how marriage counseling works, so how the sessions will be formatted. We go through the fact that typically we will be doing an assessment the first session, maybe somewhat leading into the second one also. We'll be doing an assessment where we're just asking them basic question. I can go through those questions for you.

Lee Rosen: I'm very curious. Yeah. What are they?

Sonyia Richardson: Well, after we go through the paperwork and we start asking the questions, one thing that I have my couples do is I give them each a sheet of paper. So they know each session when they come they're going to be taking notes. And they're actually going to leave with some homework also.

If they're in their first session, I give them a sheet of paper and I ask them to list the top three concerns or top three problems or issues that they are presented with in their marriage. And what that allows the couple to do is write those problems down without having to forthright come out and discuss them right in the first 10 minutes of their session. And so that helps to kind of take some of that pressure out. And then what we find is typically what one spouse has on paper is not necessarily what the other spouse had on paper.

And so it allows them to see what the other concerns of their spouse are.

So we go through that information, find out exactly what the concerns or problems are, gather a little bit of history -- so how long have the problems been going on; find out what type of approaches they've used in the past, whether they've been to pastoral counseling or maybe have visited some different programs, websites, did some workbooks. We go through that information and then they're also gathering background information as far as family dynamics. Were they raised in a household with two parents? Were they able to have a view of a healthy marriage?

And so a lot of the first session is gathering history information and finding out what the presenting problem is today.

Lee Rosen: So it doesn't sound like you're really going to feel terribly exposed during that first session.

Sonya Richardson: No, you're not.

Lee Rosen: You sort of get to meet the counselor and get comfortable.

Sonya Richardson: And our goal is to create an atmosphere where you're comfortable. So if we feel that the energy in the room is kind of going down and maybe people are feeling a little bit exposed, we will make sure we're not bringing out those issues that early on in the counseling session. So my goals as a therapist is to make sure that the couple is comfortable, especially if they're in their first session because I know there are some fears regarding it.

Lee Rosen: Right. We had a listener who wrote in and said that he really was working hard and he felt like his wife was working hard to make the marriage work and that he felt like going to a counselor was helpful, but that was not something he felt like he could propose to her. Do you sometimes feel like, maybe because of the stigma or the relationship, people are just hesitant to bring up the idea of going to a counselor?

Sonya Richardson: Unfortunately, they are. And what I often find is I'll get phone calls from one spouse who wants to schedule a marital session. They'll indicate that the spouse is not ready or willing to come in at the time. And so what we'll do is have that one person come in and I'll gather some information from them in that session and what we'll end up doing is inviting the other spouse into their session. So the other spouse may not feel as if it's necessarily marital counseling; they'll feel more or less as if they're brought into their spouse's issues regarding the marriage. So that's a way to work it out to get

around the stigma. But we do find that there is typically one person in the relationship who is more likely to initiate the counseling and set that up.

Lee Rosen: Once people are in and they've been in for their first session and they've come back several more, things are moving along and going well, do you find that people are then comfortable telling their friends about what marriage counseling is like and how it's a positive thing?

Sonya Richardson: Yes. And what I find is that doesn't happen until they test the waters and find out that it's actually something that's helpful for them. But I will have other couples who call who will say, "Well, so and so told us that they were going to marriage counseling and they thought it really worked for them." And so, yeah, people will test the waters and then the word will get out.

Lee Rosen: What I'm hearing is this is a very comfortable meeting first visit and you guys are working hard to make it feel good for everybody and gather the information that you need to develop a plan for where you're going next. But do things ever just get -- do the wheels ever come off the bus? Do people come in and kind of flip out, really a lot of pent up stuff they've been needing to get out and things just kind of go berserk?

Sonya Richardson: It's possible and it does happen sometimes. People, when they get into the counseling session, do sometimes feel as if this is a safe zone for them. They can finally let out all of their frustrations. They can finally say what they need to say. And so that'll happen sometimes and as therapists we're trained to work with that and to help them redirect some of those maybe negative emotions. Or maybe help them to normalize some of what they're feeling and encourage them to disclose that information and get that out. So it does happen sometimes.

We also find, though -- during our first session one of my main questions to the couples I work with is, what is your goal for the marriage? And sometimes they come in with different goals. Some individuals would like to stay married, would like to improve their marriage; and then some individuals will come in and say, "I don't really know if I want to be married anymore," considering divorce. And so we have to figure out what the goals are of the couple and then go from there.

Lee Rosen: Right. Boy, that must be tough when that happens.

Sonya Richardson: It is. It is. Sometimes the other spouse is not aware that that person is the point of saying they're ready for a divorce. But after speaking

with them a little bit more and figuring out truly where the couple wants to go, if they're deciding that they want to continue in their marriage then at that first session or into the first couple of sessions I tell the couple that divorce is no longer an option. If they get that out of their mind that it's no longer an option then they will realize when things get tough in the marriage, as they sometimes do, that they'll have to find other options to use instead of automatically running to divorce.

Many times when we create these options in our minds, our minds automatically run straight to those options. And so I let my couples know, if you are really considering staying in the marriage and improving your marriage, I need you to get out of your mind that divorce is even an option. And what'll happen is your mind will then find every other option that you can use to help improve the marriage or just stay in the marriage until things improve.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, this is a very basic question but how long is a typical visit?

Sonya Richardson: A typical visit is about 50 minutes to an hour.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And when people come in and you're listening for all this information and you're trying to sort of figure out -- doing your assessment -- are you usually pretty optimistic or is it, sometimes you just look at it and go, "Boy, you guys are just doomed. There's nothing I can do."

Sonya Richardson: No. We typically remain optimistic because we're trained to do a lot of cognitive restructuring. And all that means is that you take a situation that may not look as if it's a positive situation -- you may see or hear a lot of negativity about it -- you take that type of situation and restructure how you see it in your mind. And so a couple may present and have tons and tons of issues but I am looking for what's going well. Can we pick out a couple of things that are actually working? And so although they may be coming with a lot of that baggage and a lot of negative things that are going on, in my mind as a therapist I'm constantly restructuring what I'm hearing so that I don't feel deceived or feel as if there's no help for the marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that's good. Now, when you're married it seems like I guess you hear about these things all the time, these different retreats and seminars, whether they're offered through a mental health professional or through a church or whatever. Are those kinds of things helpful for people to sign up and go and do these things?

Sonya Richardson: Absolutely. I kind of see marriage retreats as a step down from counseling. So if you're not totally ready for counseling I would encourage anyone to attend a marriage retreat. And actually, I provide some marriage retreats through -- it's called Retreat to Another Level. And what we do is provide marriage retreats or couples retreats for anyone who's interested in improving or making their relationship more successful. And I actually collaborate with another licensed therapist, male therapist, and we facilitate workshops together for those retreats.

Lee Rosen: Now, it's funny to me that you feel like that's -- I guess you feel like that's a little less intense than going in for that first visit with a counselor. But to me it almost feels like the opposite, like going to a counselor in an office with nobody watching and the retreat, I assume, is with a bunch of other people who are all sort of hearing your stuff.

Sonya Richardson: Actually, what research shows is that group settings actually sometimes work best for addressing marital concerns. And so what you may find is that you're sitting in a room with other people who share some of the same issues and struggles that you're having in your marriage. And so being able to hear from other individuals what struggles they're dealing with, how they're helping to cope with them, those actually help to normalize some of what you're experiencing and feeling in your marriage.

And so it's a powerful effect in the sense of retreats actually provide a very powerful means of learning how to improve your marriage not just from licensed therapists, but from other individuals who may be dealing with some of the same issues.

Lee Rosen: How long is a retreat? Is it like a weekend kind of thing?

Sonya Richardson: It is. Our retreats are from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon.

Lee Rosen: Well, some time you and I ought to do another program and really talk through what one of the retreats is like. I think people would be fascinated to hear how that goes for folks. That's very interesting.

Sonya Richardson: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: So do a lot of people that go to a retreat then sort of take it to the next level and start coming to marriage counseling?

Sonya Richardson: Actually, they do. And what we provide at the end of our retreats -- on the Sunday of our retreats we actually provide individual consultations with the couples. And so myself and the male therapist will sit down with the couple, go through their action plan

that they developed over the weekend, and we will provide any recommendations, any types of next steps, if they have any questions we'll help with that piece. And so we do encourage if they feel like they're ready to move onto the next level and even intensify how well their marriage is going, then we would encourage them to probably seek out counseling services from a local therapist.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, do you have an idea -- I know this is impossible to answer with a great deal of accuracy, but if someone comes in for marriage counseling, from the first visit to the last visit, whenever that may be, is there an average for how many visits, how many weeks of coming to see you that is typical?

Sonyia Richardson: Well, it typically varies. But it could be anywhere from, I would say a minimum of six sessions on up to maybe about 12.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Sonyia Richardson: And what we find is that sometimes the couples who are using counseling as a last resort are often times the couples who have already made calls to pursue or get information regarding separation. So sometimes with those couples we may find that after two or three sessions -- they've already made up their mind before they came to counseling, so those sessions typically will end a little sooner.

Lee Rosen: Well, I feel like you've demystified that first meeting and made it a lot more palatable for me, anyway. I mean, it sounds a lot less frightening, a lot less threatening than it might otherwise. So I really appreciate you sort of taking us inside that closed door of the marriage counselor's office; that really is enlightening. Is there anything else about that first visit that you feel like we need to know?

Sonyia Richardson: I would just say that as a therapist it's our goal to make you very comfortable during your first session because we know you present with some fears and we know it may be very frightening. So just know that our goal is to make you comfortable. And so the entire time we're having to deal with the fact that -- in our minds trying to figure out, "How can I make this couple more comfortable? How can I allow them to feel comfortable in my office to the point where they can disclose personal information?" And so you may be presenting with some fears regarding your first session, and as a therapist I'm concentrating on how can I make you more comfortable your first session? So we're both working towards the same goal and just know that we're here to support you and just to help you through your marriage.

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Lee Rosen: Well, I feel like you've already made -- folks that are listening to this will probably be a lot more comfortable at their first session because of the discussion that we've had today. So thank you so much for making the time to be with us.

Sonyia Richardson: No problem. Enjoyed it.

Lee Rosen: I'd like to thank Sonyia Richardson for joining us and I do believe -- I feel very strongly -- that she's helped ease some of the common fears that a lot of folks, including myself, might have about seeing a marriage counselor. It certainly does feel a lot less mysterious than it might have just a few minutes ago.

If you would like to find out more about Sonyia's counseling and therapy services, she has a website SonyiaRichardson.com. We will of course put a link to her website in the show notes. You can also call her office directly at (704) 548-5298. Also, they have a website at AnotherLevelRetreats.com, which obviously gives information about the retreats we that we discussed. I think that that would be very interesting to learn more about. There are some retreats coming up very shortly, September 5-7 is one and then November 7-9. So those are coming up very, very soon, so you might want to take a look at AnotherLevelRetreats.com.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. If you have feedback about this show or any of our shows we'd love to hear from you. We have a comment line set up where you can call in at (919) 256-3083. Or you can send us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We'd love to know how you think we're doing, and if you have suggestions for future topics we would appreciate hearing about those as well.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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.