

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.



The Commuter Marriage

This is Episode number 31 of Stay Happily Married, "The Commuter Marriage."

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 by telephone with Dr. Tina Tessina, better known to some of our listeners as "Dr. Romance." Tina is the author of 13 books. One of them is *Money, Sex and Kids*. Another one is *How to be a Couple and Still be Free*. And of course, *The Commuter Marriage*, which we will be talking about today.

Tina is a licensed psychotherapist living in Southern California and has 30 years of experience counseling individuals and couples. Welcome to the show, Tina. I'm glad you could be here today.

Tina Tessina: Thank you for having me, Lee. It's a pleasure.

Lee Rosen: You have really hit upon a topic that I find is just critical for people to figure out and deal with, this whole topic of the commuter marriage. Are you seeing a lot of folks that one spouse or the other are sort of traveling all the time? How is that working in our society today?

Tina Tessina: I think there's a lot more of it now, especially if you include military families. We have a lot of couples that are separated for one reason or another and it's growing. We're getting more mobile and it's growing.

Lee Rosen: I live in the Research Triangle Park area of North Carolina and so many of my neighbors are in the technology area of work and many

of them head out on Sunday night or Monday morning and don't come back until Thursday night or Friday night. I guess you're seeing that all over the country.

Tina Tessina: Absolutely. And then you add people like firemen who are away from home for several days at a time, and truckers, and people who had to get a job in a different place and their family is back where the house is and the kids are in school and that sort of thing so they're not going to move right away.

Lee Rosen: Right. I hadn't really thought about that, the truckers, the firefighters and the military -- just millions of people in the military.

Tina Tessina: Right.

Lee Rosen: You are right. I mean, really I had seen it as a big issue but, wow, when I hear you explain it I realize it's much, much bigger than even I thought about. What got you interested? Is this something that was coming up in your practice, or how did you get focused on this topic?

Tina Tessina: Yes. I just was seeing more and more couples that are struggling with this issue. As I said, military families are another big part and that's been so hard because so many of them say that people in the reserves, for instance, didn't really expect to be deployed initially and they didn't expect to be deployed for a long time. And it's just dragged on and on and on so it's very tough.

Lee Rosen: Have you ever lived this life of a commuter marriage yourself?

Tina Tessina: No. And I'm really glad I haven't.

Lee Rosen: You are.

Tina Tessina: But I work with lots and lots of couples that have.

Lee Rosen: Right. What do you see happening to folks when they're dealing with this commuter issue? What is going on in their marriages?

Tina Tessina: Well, it's tough. There's a lot of struggle. The person at home is left with all the chores and all the hassle, getting the kids to do their homework and mowing the lawn and everything. If something breaks down in the house -- the usual division of labor that happens in marriage is gone because one person is gone most of the time.

Now, people who come home for the weekend, that's a little different; but still, one person feels like they're there all the time

with everything and the person who's traveling feels disconnected, like they can't stay in touch with what's going on. So that's what the book is about. It's about how to do the division of labor fairly, how to stay connected while you're at a distance. I mean, we're really very fortunate now because we have a lot of technology [inaudible] be connected.

Lee Rosen: Right. So do you find that people do use that technology? Do they stay in touch while they're apart?

Tina Tessina: I show them how to use it effectively. For instance, I recommend saving the precious phone time for intimacy. And staying connected and doing things like deciding how you're going to pay the bills or what the schedule's going to be when you come home on the weekend, do that by e-mail so that you're not using up your precious phone time. It's often hard to get connected when the spouse at home may be at work and not able to be on the phone all the time and that sort of thing.

So that phone time is precious so I really recommend that they save the phone time for intimacy. I highly recommend phone sex and I just think that it's really important to keep the connection going in the marriage however you can.

Lee Rosen: I definitely want to talk more about phone sex. Let me ask you this, though, before that. Do you feel like commuter marriages lead to divorce more commonly -- more often -- than marriages without the commuter aspect? Is that something you're seeing happening?

Tina Tessina: Yeah, if the couple doesn't know how to handle it. What leads to divorce is really being disconnected, whether you're living 24/7 together or separated physically. It's the emotional disconnection that leads to divorce and it's very easy to let that emotional disconnection happen when you're also physically unconnected. But as we all know, it can happen when you're physically connected too.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, I see a fair number of -- I know a fair number of people where they are faced with a choice. They are faced with commuting and making a lot more money if they're willing to travel, or staying in the home town and working but making a lot less money. What do you do with that? I mean, obviously money makes life easier for a lot of families, having extra money. But how do you balance those two things, or can you? Have you learned enough to say, "Look, it doesn't matter what the money is. Don't commute"?

Tina Tessina: No. I think, first of all, there are reasons that couples don't have a choice about commuting or not and I think that you can keep your

marriage together while you do that but it's not easy. And if the money is just for extras, not for survival, I really think it's not -- it's a really tough thing to do and I think people should understand that it's not as easy as they may think it. There are some benefits to doing commuter marriages, too.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's what I was going to ask you. Sometimes my wife and I will end up on trips individually at times and there is sort of some truth to that "absence makes the heart grow fonder" thing.

Tina Tessina: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: So what benefits are there to the commuter thing?

Tina Tessina: I just want to say, my husband and I have a saying which is, "How can I miss you if you don't go away?"

Lee Rosen: Good question.

Tina Tessina: But, yeah, the benefits are that it just refreshes the connection. When you get back together, you appreciate each other more. It's very easy to take each other for granted when you're together all the time, and take the little jobs you do that aren't really noticed for granted. But when somebody is completely gone, you notice what they were doing when they were there and what you miss about them and how hard it is, for instance, to sleep alone when you're used to sleeping together, and all those things. And so it really makes you appreciate each other more.

It also causes each individual to develop more self-sufficiency so they can do everything themselves. And that's good for the relationship. It takes out the pressure of somebody leaning on somebody else to do something. So those things are good and you really learn -- when you're all by yourself you really learn what it takes to make you happy and then you can later on communicate that to your partner. And I've seen it enhance marriages as well as destroy marriages. But again, it's not an easy thing to do so people have to do it very thoughtfully, which my book is to help them do, of course.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It sounds like you have written the manual for how to do this and make it work. Are you getting much feedback from folks about the book? Do you find people have read it, put the techniques to work and their marriages are working much better?

Tina Tessina: Yes, I have. I get a lot of e-mails from people who say, "Thank you for this book. It really helped me."

Lee Rosen: Okay. So phone sex. All kidding aside, that is an important piece of advice, yes?

Tina Tessina: Absolutely. It is an important piece of advice. We have trouble talking about it seriously because we want to giggle.

Lee Rosen: Well, yes. I want to giggle right now. Let's just get that out of our system.

Tina Tessina: Right. But it's really important to keep that intimate connection alive, and especially if you're separate for long periods of time. That's the only way you have of doing it. So I highly recommend that you set aside some time to be intimate over the phone. It takes getting past the discomfort of it, but it's very valuable in keeping your sexual relationship going and keeping your connection. And also, it's protection against the big problem that happens which is affairs.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Tina Tessina: So if either partner, the stay-at-home partner or the traveling partner, is in close proximity of people of the opposite sex and they're not getting anything from their own partner, then that makes the temptation stronger. So it's important to keep your connection together with each other and phone sex is one way to do it.

Lee Rosen: One way to do it, absolutely. Well, that makes good sense, yeah.

Tina Tessina: Yeah. So I talk about that in the book, too. And about, say, 200 years ago, if a sailor went to sea his family didn't know if he was alive or dead for months and months and months. I mean, they were just gone. Today we don't have that problem. Today we have all this technology. We can share pictures over the Internet, we can instant message.

Another problem in this, of course, is parents staying connected to their children. And some parents have used online games and played them with their kids, where everybody gets an avatar -- a little cartoon figure of themselves -- and they get to keep their connection going that way. As well as sharing pictures and videos of the kids' games and concerts and plays and whatever they're doing. And the away parent can share pictures of what he or she is doing so that the kids can see and have some idea. Kids are very visually oriented so sharing pictures of what you're doing, like the conference room that you're sitting in, the hotel you're in, or the --

Lee Rosen: Just to give your spouse a feel for what's happening in your life.

Tina Tessina: Your spouse and your kids --

Lee Rosen: And your kids, right.

Tina Tessina: -- a feel for what's going on so that they have an actual picture to work from. And all of that helps. So it is possible. Again, it's not an easy thing to do but it is possible. And I talk about also -- for instance, especially in the military --

In the book I have various couples and you follow these couples through all the processes and all the problems they have and see how they solve them. And one of the problems for people in the military, the people who are left at home, is having support. So I talk about how to get support with in the military. There are groups and support groups that you can join and also how to stay close to friends and family and keep those support systems going and let people know that you really need just to hang out and eat pizza sometimes and that sort of thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are there a lot of couples that are apart -- like, for instance, these military families -- where the spouse is gone for a long time or whatever it may be, some sort of long-term work assignment, where when they do come back together that that's a challenge? You would sort of imagine, "Well, golly, he's coming home. That's going to be wonderful." Or she's coming home. Everything, I think, thinks that would be easy, but is that not the case? Is it sometimes hard when they come back together?

Tina Tessina: Reentry is often very difficult because there are a lot of expectations. Everybody expects it to be wonderful and perfect; and if it's not, if you're feeling strange and awkward with each other -- which is very common -- that can be devastating if your expectation is that the reentry will be wonderful. So I talk about how to do reentry, how to do reentry if you're coming back on a weekly basis as in the case of a trucker or fireman or somebody.

Lee Rosen: Right. But even weekly you feel like there's a reentry transition that folks have to go through.

Tina Tessina: Absolutely. And one of the tendencies, for instance, if somebody comes back on a weekly basis -- say, on the weekends -- is to greet them with a list of complaints about everything that went wrong because that's what you were frustrated with and that's what you want support for. So I talk about not doing that.

The first thing you need to do on reentry is say, "Hi. I missed you. I'm glad to see you." And then you can start to talk about what happened while you were gone and all those things. But if you meet your spouse with all the exciting things that happened on your business trip, the spouse is going to feel like you think that's more exciting than --

Lee Rosen: Being back.

Tina Tessina: -- your family.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Tina Tessina: So you have to remember to say, "Hi. I'm glad to see you. I missed you," and make that connection first. And then there will be an appropriate time for both of you to share what happened, good and bad, while you were separated.

Lee Rosen: Does it make much difference if it's the -- at least the stereotype, and at least the folks that I know that commute, it tends to be the husband that goes off and the wife who stays in the marital home.

Tina Tessina: More often than not that's the case. But even in the military now women are traveling.

Lee Rosen: Right. Does that make much difference in terms of the way you would handle it?

Tina Tessina: Oh, yeah. It makes a big difference because if a man is left home, especially if there are kids involved, very often men haven't had too much experience with that. And so they really get left with a difficult problem to solve and so they need some training before the separation happens if there's a chance, and they need support. And women are better, generally speaking, at giving affection and those things. And so men have to learn that part. And men are better at fixing things, doing things mechanical, thinking about things in a rational way. I mean, we're just hardwired that way and so different things will be missing if it's the man missing or the woman missing. So you have to figure out your way around that.

And one of the things I say is a benefit is that you do learn to do those things. The man will learn how to be more affectionate and handle the day-to-day stuff, cooking all the meals and making the lunches and all that stuff with his kids.

Lee Rosen: Right. You get an appreciation for what your spouse has been doing, if they've been handling it.

Tina Tessina: Right. Exactly. And a woman will learn to do the more mechanical kinds of stuff. Now, that's not universally true. Sometimes these days the woman is the major breadwinner and so on and so forth, but we still have a lot of the traditional styles going on.

Lee Rosen: It's funny. My wife was out of town for a week and I was in charge of the kids during that week and I realized that in addition to making the lunches and all the rigmarole with the laundry and everything else, I had to set time for nurturing. If I didn't do that, we were going to have a meltdown. I wanted to be efficient and it's like I wanted those lunch boxes ready to go first thing in the morning and it's like you really do -- you learn a lot when your spouse is gone. I can see the positives.

Tina Tessina: Absolutely. And you learn to appreciate your spouse more. You learn to realize that she's been doing all that without you even knowing about it because you weren't around for those particular things when you're at work during the day or something. And we do get a lot more appreciation for each other.

Lee Rosen: But it does sound like it's tough to do if you haven't read your book. It really seems to me that your book is a gift for all of those folks that are either in the midst of a commuter marriage or facing that. With the economy today and all that, I suspect more and more people will be dealing with travel as part of their lives. So I'm glad you've got the book out there for folks to turn to as a guide. I really appreciate you spending time with us today and filling us in.

Tina Tessina: Well, than you, Lee. I really appreciate it. I wrote it to help people and I really hope that people find out about it who need it and can get the help that's in there.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me just tell all of you listening, *The Commuter Marriage* is out now and it's from Adams Media. And we're going to put a link where you can get the book in the show notes for this show at StayHappilyMarried.com.

But let me tell you also, Tina will sign a copy for you at her website. You go to TinaTessina.com. If you go to her site you can order a signed copy, which I think is always nice to have the autograph of the author in a book. Her website doesn't just have the books, though. It's got a lot of great information about the services that she offers, the upcoming appearances that she's making, about all of her other books. I mentioned 13 books total. She also has a blog at the

site. The site is a terrific resource. You can sign up while you're there for a free newsletter called *Happiness Tips from Tina*. So I would encourage you to zip on over to TinaTessina.com. Visit the site. There will of course be a link in the show notes.

And I appreciate all of you listening today. I hope that you have gotten as much out of this discussion as I have. It's funny because I don't live in a life of a commuter marriage, but a lot of what we've talked about today really is helpful to me in my non-commuter marriage. And I'm guessing that if you're in a commuter marriage it's even more helpful. This book to me just hits me -- it really is the manual. It makes sense if you're dealing with a commuter situation or worrying about that coming. Buy the book, learn the tips, and you're inoculating yourself. You're finding a way to stay married, to make it work and to have happy future together.

I appreciate you joining us. We will be doing this again in a week. Until then, stay happily married.

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