

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.



Is Your Procrastinating Spouse Hurting Your Marriage?

This is Episode number 33 of Stay Happily Married, "Is Your Procrastinating Spouse Hurting Your 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'm glad you could join us.

I am here by telephone with Dr. Gloria Arenson. She is a psychotherapist and author who's been happily married for over 30 years to a procrastinator. In her latest book, *Procrastination Nation*, she delves into the problems procrastinators face and how it can affect the relationships around them. Welcome to the show, Gloria.

Gloria Arenson: I'm glad to be with you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am so glad you can be with us. You know, I hate to admit this but I think that I am probably a pretty big procrastinator and I do agree with your thesis that it does bring some issues to relationships. You've been married 30 years, is that right?

Gloria Arenson: More than that now, yeah.

Lee Rosen: And your husband is a procrastinator?

Gloria Arenson: Oh, indeed. Indeed. Although, I have to admit, he has improved tremendously since he met me.

Lee Rosen: He has? Yeah. Well, how does his being a procrastinator affect your marriage? What is the impact of that?

Gloria Arenson: Well, as a non-procrastinator it's very frustrating because some of the things procrastinators do is they don't get started. Sometimes they do get started but they don't finish. And either of those can be very annoying. And also, many procrastinators come late.

Now, I have to say proudly that that's one of the things my husband no longer does, although one of the things I've noticed -- I call it having my own living laboratory because I'm up close and personal. And one of the things I've noticed about him is that he doesn't come late anymore but he leaves things to the very last minute --

Lee Rosen: Right. Even after all this time.

Gloria Arenson: -- and barely makes it in time. And I think over the years one of the things that I've read about is that in the 1990s scientists discovered that some people have something called a thrill gene. The thrill gene creates behavior where people unconsciously manipulate their lives to get this sense of thrill which for them just feels good.

Lee Rosen: So they want to have that sort of high-risk, got to get it done at the last minute kind of adrenalin rush, I guess.

Gloria Arenson: Right. But I don't think they're aware of it.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: They're not aware of it but it can be -- because I've seen this in a number of my clients where they are comfortable with it but it looks awful from the outside.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'm afraid that you may be describing me.

Gloria Arenson: Ah.

Lee Rosen: I like that last minute, that stress that it creates. Well, how does being married to a procrastinator -- how does it impact the marriage and is it really a -- I mean, is there the potential for this to be the issue that causes a marriage not to work?

Gloria Arenson: It could very well be because people who are the kind of procrastinators that I talk about in my book are people for whom this is an ongoing pattern and it's a pattern that harms them or their loved ones or co-workers. In other words, it's a person who's

supposed to pay bills and they don't pay their bills on time or they don't get their taxes done on time. They're going to pay penalties.

When I first met my husband he was in graduate school and he was a perfectionist as well as a procrastinator -- and the two go hand-in-hand. And he didn't think one of his papers was good enough and he was up night after night trying to make this paper good enough and finally did not hand it in, and consequently had to pay for another semester of graduate school, which was not cheap.

Lee Rosen: Right. And that impacts the economic unit, the marriage, where everybody's got goals and --

Gloria Arenson: Right.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: Or let's say a person is out of work and they're not looking for a job; they keep putting it off and putting it off. So there can be definite stresses on any relationship with this.

Or another thing is -- and I tell this story in my book. I call it "the Thanksgiving story," about a Thanksgiving when we were having family over and we were getting things ready. We didn't have a dining room in that house and we had a very large kitchen. And as we were setting things up my husband suddenly looked very upset and he said, "Oh, my gosh. Our chairs don't match." And he disappeared on Thanksgiving morning to go out to hunt down matching folding chairs. I don't know what's open on Thanksgiving.

Lee Rosen: Right. Not much.

Gloria Arenson: Now, I was getting everything ready and went into our guest bathroom that he had -- because he's very handy -- he had put up new wallpaper but he hadn't replaced the molding along the bottom of the wall. And I thought, "This isn't finished. It looks dreadful. What will people think?" Well, he had one "what will people think" and I had another "what will people think?" And I couldn't figure this out.

And after the dust had -- and I got very angry, I have to say. I got very angry. And finally after Thanksgiving was over, when we were both feeling calm -- and that's one of the things I want to tell people who are the recipients of the procrastinator's behavior -- I said, "What is that all about? Why did you have to run out, leaving the bathroom unfinished, but you had to get the chairs?"

And he said, "Well, my mother had very low self-esteem so it was very important to her that she appear to be okay. And she put a lot of pressure on things have to look right." And that was still bugging him many, many, many years later; he was still triggered by that thought.

And I said, "Well, you know, it's really interesting because I grew up in an apartment in New York City and we barely had room for anything but we would have gatherings and all the chairs -- didn't matter, desk chairs, kitchen chairs, piano bench -- and we had a wonderful time." So, you see, our backgrounds had given us a different slant on things.

So this is the first thing that people need to look at. The procrastinator is not you. You have your history; he or she has their history. And the most important thing is to understand that and this makes for some very interesting conversations. And I don't mean that sarcastically. It really helps you understand and learn more about your partner --

Lee Rosen: Right. Figuring out what the root of all this is.

Gloria Arenson: -- because you come from different worlds.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: Now, the most important message -- and I do have a chapter in my book devoted to explaining this to people who don't procrastinate -- is that procrastinators are not lazy, they're not bad, they're not stupid. They are paralyzed by fear and that's at the heart of procrastination.

Lee Rosen: Interesting. Very interesting. Well, let me ask you, your book -- and I want to hear more about it, but would you consider the book -- is it aimed at the procrastinator or aimed at the spouse of the procrastinator or both?

Gloria Arenson: It's for both.

Lee Rosen: So both the husband and the wife ought to read it?

Gloria Arenson: Oh, yes.

Lee Rosen: And do you give -- so if I'm married to a procrastinator do you give me some ideas on how to straighten them out, get them to move along?

Gloria Arenson: Well, yes, I do. And as I said -- well, let me just share a little bit about the fear so that will give the spouse or partner understanding of what I mean.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: Because there are five kinds of fears and the most common one I just spoke about, which is fear of failure. So a lot of people are holding back because they are afraid of failing, of actually failing. And along with that goes this fear of being embarrassed or ridiculed or harmed if they don't do it right. So that's the place where people hold back.

I once counseled a couple -- a woman called me and she was just in tears because she and her husband were doing a remodel of their home which is -- that's a whole other book.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: How to stay married during a remodel. And it turned out that she came from a family where her family was a contractor and she knew all about remodeling. But her husband was just an ordinary guy off the street and he didn't know which end was up on a hammer. And that created tremendous stress in their marriage because he was afraid he wouldn't do it right and he kept kind of putting it off. And she became more and more frantic and more and more manipulative and that really just rent their marriage apart.

So looking stupid, being embarrassed, not doing it right, is a very powerful fear.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: Now, another fear -- and this one really can affect a marriage -- is the fear of success. There are many people walking around who say they want to succeed -- whether it's at work, having money, learning new things -- but secretly, on an unconscious level, they don't think that they are worthy.

And I've recently been working with someone who discovered that he always thought that he was an outsider in his family also because he was much younger than his siblings and it's like he was an afterthought. And that became the pattern of his life, "I don't count. I'm not important. So therefore, those kind of experiences aren't for me." And that can be very powerful if you are married to someone who's not trying to put himself or herself ahead, not trying to

achieve what you would call success; that varies from person to person.

Now, another fear is what I call "I don't want to, you can't make me." And that --

Lee Rosen: Explain that one.

Gloria Arenson: That has a lot to do with from our childhood with fear of authority because, you know, when we're kids we are in the power of our teachers and our parents. And most of us have found things that we say, "I don't want to do that." So that has a lot to do with garages and closets and chores.

Lee Rosen: All being a mess.

Gloria Arenson: Yeah. And so what happens then is the person really acts like a kid and they just don't -- it's passive aggressive.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Gloria Arenson: They don't come out and say, "I don't really want to do that, honey." They put it off and put it and put it off.

Lee Rosen: Just don't do it. Always something more important, yeah. So you've got failure, embarrassment, success, authority. What's the fifth fear?

Gloria Arenson: The fifth one is very tricky. I call it fear of the future. And fear of the future is not fear of the unknown; it's in an irrational future. And speaking of garages, I'll just tell you a very poignant story of a woman in one of my workshops. She was putting off cleaning out her garage.

Now, her husband had gotten a new job and they had to move to another city in about two weeks and she still hadn't gotten to the garage. Now, it turned out that in the garage there were boxes of baby clothes because they had a child, and she wanted another child and her husband did not want anymore children. And what she told herself was, "If I clean out these boxes and give away these clothes, it means I will never have another child." And she couldn't take that. So it was symbolic.

And that accounts for a lot of procrastination. There are hidden fears of a future that they're irrational and most people aren't even aware of them until I start playing what I call the "worst-case

scenario" game with them. Because they don't know what's motivating them to not do --

Lee Rosen: Right. So you go through and you say, "What'll happen if...what'll happen if...what'll happen if..." kind of questions.

Gloria Arenson: Yeah. And I usually say, "What are you afraid will happen?" Because if I say, "What'll happen if," they'll say, "Oh, I'll do it and I'll be happy." But, no, if that were true, you'd be doing it.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me ask you this. What do people try to do to address this, before they hear your ideas and your solutions? What kind of things do the average -- what do they try to stop the procrastination? How do they go about it?

Gloria Arenson: Well, there are an awful lot of books out but the books tell them how to change the surface behavior and to say, "set your alarm," or "handle paper," or "throw things out." It makes a lot of sense but if underneath you are terrified, nothing is going to shift you. You would rather pay the government a penalty on your late tax. The consequences are painful but people put up with it because the fear is -- whatever it is they're afraid of is worse.

So by book gets to what is it you're really afraid of? Where did it come from? And I teach people how to eliminate the fear.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you take a very different approach. Other folks are looking at these books -- and it's funny because I'm in the middle of an audio book on procrastination and basically it's doing what you're saying. It's saying make a list and do the first thing on the list. And if that thing that's first on the list is something that I have a really deep reason for not wanting to do, then it doesn't matter what kind of list I have, I'm not going to do it.

Gloria Arenson: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so you're saying, hey, let's get at the root of this thing and then we'll see the procrastination go away.

Gloria Arenson: Yes.

Lee Rosen: I would guess that in a marriage that when there are these deeper issues that procrastination is just one of the problems, that many times these issues create other problems as well.

Gloria Arenson: Yes. Well, the thing is that the person who's the procrastinator really needs to begin to address what it's about because they really have no clue.

And, if I may, I want to tell another story that's in my book about a man who was a last minute person and his wife -- she was just tearing out her hair one day when he had a business appointment and he went racing around the house saying, "I lost the address. I lost the address. Where am I going? Where am I going?" And it was a business appointment and it was very important and he kept saying, "Maybe it's on my computer."

And she said, "Do you have the man's phone number?"

He said, "Yes."

And she said, "Call him. Call him. He'll tell you the address."

And he said, "No, I can't do that."

And she's just watching this happen and he's racing around trying to find the address. And eventually he called and made it out -- got dressed and got out and I guess made it to the appointment.

And doing what I suggest in my book, which is do not be judgmental, realize this person is driven by fear even though it looks bizarre to you.

She sat down with him a couple of days later and she said, "What was that all about? I don't understand why you couldn't pick up the phone and just say, 'By the way, I've lost that piece of --'" whatever, "Sorry. I can't find the address." Because there's a lot of fear of embarrassment here, fear of ridicule and fear of what will people think?

And he looked at her and he got very angry and he said, "I should have known." Now, that was really amazing. "I should have known." Well, but you didn't.

And one of the things I teach people to do also is try to figure out where this has come from. And she said, "How old when you --" because the look on his face was just so frustrated and she said, "How old do you feel right now?"

And he said, "3." And he said, "Well, my mother always said, 'You should know better.'" Now, when you're 3, you can't know. Three can't know; 3 is 3. And he turned into a 3-year-old. And that 3-year-

old was supposed to know what he didn't know. Well, that'll really drive you crazy.

And she felt so sad for him because here's this 45-year-old man and he's still 3.

Now, I talk about this also when I discuss fear and the brain because you see there's a part of our brain called the limbic system which is very important. It's the old brain. And in the limbic system there is no time and the past and the present are there at the same time. So we are all of us constantly going back and forth between our past and our present and sometimes we're 3 and sometimes we're 45. And that's what she discovered and then she had a lot more compassion for her husband.

Lee Rosen: Right. Suddenly she saw it all in a very different way.

Gloria Arenson: Yes.

Lee Rosen: It sounds like the ideas that you have in the book really do promote a deeper communication than how to -- when people are in a marriage where things are tough, they're really lacking communication and you're really not just -- you're helping people to understand one another and to really dig deeper with one another so they really are communicating in a very significant way.

Gloria Arenson: Yes. And there's another hint. And this came to me through my own personal experience. My husband has a bad habit of leaving his crossie [ph] spoon on the counter and he'll procrastinate about putting it in the sink. And this has been going on for 30 years and it's the little things like the toothpaste, you know. And there will be times that I would just walk into the kitchen and just go, "Aaa."

Well, a number of years ago my husband had some very serious surgery, very serious. And when that fortunately recovered, happily, and right after that time I walked into the kitchen and there was the spoon. And I said to myself, "What if he had died? If he had died and I walked into the kitchen and I saw his spoon, I would look at that spoon and I would think, oh, what I wouldn't give to have him back." And in that moment it just put everything in such a different perspective. And he has improved; it's not all the time, but every once in a while I see the spoon. And I smile because instead of getting angry it makes me think of how much I love him and how special he is.

Lee Rosen: Right. That spoon means a whole different thing today than it did.

Gloria Arenson: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's a very nice story. Well, it sounds like your husband has improved but he's not quite where you might like him to be on some of these procrastination issues. Do you continue to work on it after all these years?

Gloria Arenson: I do. You can't barge into people's lives; they have to be willing. So I pick my moments and a lot of it is who he is. For instance, I'm a person who -- I'm going on a trip in 10 days and I already have a list of what I'm taking. So he's never going to be me, and that's the first thing. We have to accept our spouses as they are. This is who they are. That's one of the biggest things.

However, when we think it harms us -- and that's something that needs to be looked at -- then we have a choice of what we're going to do. And, for instance, my husband, as I said, is very, very handy and he does many, many things very, very well. But sometimes he doesn't do them in the time I would like them done.

So I have to -- rather than criticize him because it has to be my way, if I'm uncomfortable with something there are times that I'll say, "You know, I really think that we need to have this done by such and such a day and I'm not sure that you're going to be able to do that," with other obligations that he has. And I will get someone else to do it. Now, I don't do that in a vindictive way. I just do it in a way that I need to feel okay. And I discuss it with him; I don't just go behind his back.

So communication is really important. And the spouse or partner needs to work on himself and herself also because we are not perfect either. And our partners are putting up with us.

Lee Rosen: that's true. Well, let me ask you, if I read your book and I put the ideas to work that are in it, is my procrastinating spouse going to have cleaned the garage and going to start getting places on time, or am I just going to be less concerned about whether the garage is clean and whether they get places on time?

Gloria Arenson: It's going to be both.

Lee Rosen: Both, okay.

Gloria Arenson: It's going to depend on the procrastinator, how much they really are interested in looking at this, because the book is very user-friendly. It's very friendly, it's very supportive, it doesn't make anyone feel like there's anything wrong with them, because everything that I say

makes sense. This is a fear and when most people look at it, instead of -- because procrastinators certainly have eroded self-esteem because they're telling themselves, "Why aren't I finishing this?" They're frustrated also.

So what I'm doing is giving a lot of information and I'm saying, listen, you are not bad, you are not stupid. There is a fear here and you didn't even know it. So let's take a look at how to overcome this fear.

When they overcome the fears, then their attitude changes because I teach a technique in my book called EFT, emotional freedom technique, which is an acupressure technique and it raises the serotonin in the brain -- and the serotonin is a soothing neurochemical -- and it floods a part of the limbic system called the amygdala which is the trigger of the fear and it actually disconnects the trigger.

Lee Rosen: Interesting.

Gloria Arenson: So that people feel different.

Lee Rosen: Right. And if you don't have that fear, you don't have the procrastination.

Gloria Arenson: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic.

Gloria Arenson: Yeah. I recently had a client that I started to work with and after his first session he came in and I said, "Have you noticed anything?"

And first he said, "Well, not really." And then he said, "But I did this and I did this and I did --"

And I said, "Well, see?"

Lee Rosen: Right. It's working. Things are happening.

Gloria Arenson: He hadn't even noticed it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I am very pleased that you were able to join us today and I'm really excited by your book. I think it sounds like it will help a lot of people who are -- I mean, this is just such a common issue and you've broadened my perspective on it to see it in a much different way than I might have seen it 20 minutes ago. So I really appreciate that.

Gloria Arenson: Well, I'd like to tell the people listening that if they go to my Web site, which is www.GloriaArenson.com they can read lots more articles about procrastination and actually download instructions for doing EFT, with a diagram and instructions on how they can start to practice this themselves.

Lee Rosen: Great. Well, thank you for joining us. Let me mention the site again. It's GloriaArenson.com. And it is a real resource; lots of information about how you can deal with procrastination and make things, I think, work much, much better in your marriage. I don't think that I realized quite so well how much procrastination can impact a marriage until talking to Gloria. She really is a wealth of information. So visit the site, GloriaArenson.com. You can get a copy of the book there if you like, and lots of articles, lots of information.

And thank all of you for listening today. Appreciate it. I'm glad you could join us. We will be back next week. In the meantime, if you would like to leave comments about this show we have a comment line at (919) 256-3083. We welcome your e-mails at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We'd love to hear from you, your ideas for future shows, your comments about this show, anything at all. We very much enjoy hearing from you.

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.