

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.



A Marriage Counselor Goes to Marriage Counseling

This is Episode number 39 of Stay Happily Married, "A Marriage Counselor Goes to Marriage Counseling."

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 have here by telephone Jennifer Coleman. Jennifer is a life transition coach with Rosen Law Firm and she helps clients set goals and priorities for their life after divorce. The last time Jennifer was with us we talked about some of the things she's learned about marriage from being a divorce coach, and obviously that gives her a really unique perspective on people handling their marriages.

Jennifer, welcome to the show.

Jennifer Coleman: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you could be here today. You know, you and I have been talking over the course of the last several months and I know that you decided in your marriage to go and talk to a marriage counselor. Now, you've been married for how long?

Jennifer Coleman: Almost 13 years.

Lee Rosen: Now, when I think of going to a marriage counselor I have this vision of going because my marriage would be in a lot of trouble and I would view that as kind of a last resort. That's not the way you looked at it, right?

Jennifer Coleman: No. Well, having done a lot of marriage counseling myself, I know that it would be a lot easier to help people who come when they just want to make things better or they just have some concerns or they want to be able to make a deeper connection, rather than wait until both people are at a total panic zone or one person is already halfway out the door.

Lee Rosen: So you decided to be proactive?

Jennifer Coleman: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: So what made you think, golly, I ought to do something about -- how did that pop into your head?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, both my husband and I were going through a fairly stressful time. We were looking at some major life changes and a geographic move and some career changes and I realized that I just wasn't coping with that as well as I could be. And the way I know that about myself is I tend to get very grumpy, tend to be shorter in my responses to people around me. And people who are very close to me, like my spouse, just don't seem to be able to do anything right. Everything that he would do would be annoying to me. And when that starts happening, I know that a lot of that is more about myself and how I'm coping than any big changes that the people or my environment has made.

So I thought it would be a good idea for us to go in and talk about the changes in our life and how we could address those in the most positive way together.

Lee Rosen: Well, now I'm curious. When you decided that you wanted to go and talk to a counselor -- now, you are a counselor but in this situation you're looking at it very differently. You're coming to the situation as more of a patient. How did you go about deciding who you should work with?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I have to say that seeking out a marriage counselor is -- having the experience I way I did, I've realized what people go through when they come to see me or when they seek out any counselor out there. The hardest part is picking up the phone. The hardest part is picking up the phone and calling to say, "I have this issue and I'd like to work on it," because it means you have to say to this person, this stranger on the phone that you don't even know, that something is going on. And that can feel kind of funny.

I was the one who wanted to seek out counseling but I kind of wanted to push that off on my husband. "You call and you pick someone." So we both did some research online and looked at some profiles of counselors. There are lots of sites available online to help you do that. The American Psychological Association, the American Marriage and Family Therapists Organization have their own sites where you can find therapists in your area. Stay Happily Married does the same thing.

And so we actually split up a list and marked off the people that we thought sounded from their little profiles like a good match for us. And then once I had narrowed down a list, my husband went through it and picked out the three or four that he thought he would be comfortable with. And those are the people that we called.

Lee Rosen: And did you meet with more than one of them or did you just go and meet the one? How did you do it?

Jennifer Coleman: We actually talked on the phone with three different potential counselors. And that was for several reasons. First of all, we wanted to narrow down what insurance they took, and we could see that from their Web site. Then when we talked with them on the phone we wanted to know kind of what their availability was, how long it was going to take us to get a first appointment, a little bit more about their style of working with clients, and just to kind of see if there was a good fit or a good feeling in a few minute conversation with someone.

Lee Rosen: Did just one of you call, or did you do a conference call, or how did you do that?

Jennifer Coleman: I think that when we came down to the last couple of people I actually called and spoke to them. I think it would be great if you could manage to do a conference call or -- basically my husband and I just mostly shared information back and forth.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, were you the driver behind this decision? It sounds like you were, right?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think that we were definitely united from the beginning about that it was a good idea. But it was me who realized that I wasn't coping as well as I could be and that that was affecting our relationship; and that, because the changes that we were going through were affecting both of us and being driven by both of us, we realized that it wasn't just about me. Like it wasn't a time probably for just individual counseling; it was a time for us to learn to be able to make joint decisions in a way that was going to make both of us

happy in the long term and to support each other while we were doing that instead of tearing each other down.

I think that when you go through a very large life change it's easy to -- when you're stressed out to lash out at the person who's your main support system. And so we just wanted to ensure that when we were making those kinds of decisions that we were supporting and lifting up each other and finding little ways to do that every day. And sometimes when you're stressed out and you're tired or you have young kids, that's really hard to do.

And so one thing that we found was just going to the counseling, just having that time, meant that we had to leave our house together and leave our kids at home and the stressors aside. And we actually chose to go to dinner each night after the counseling, because you go to the counseling and you're rushing to get there because you're trying to go after work. And then you get there, you're there for 45 or 50 minutes, and you leave and a lot happened but you arranged for a sitter or whatever.

So we would go to dinner and debrief about what happened in the counseling, what we talked about and what was helpful and what our ideas were. And we found that we probably did just as much work in reflecting on and just making the time for each other that we hadn't done until we made it a point to go to counseling.

Lee Rosen: Right. And then you're communicating, which is like the message that I keep getting hammered into my head in these shows is, "Communicate, communicate, communicate."

Jennifer Coleman: Right. And so it probably came down to we weren't making enough time and space to communicate during the times that we weren't completely stressed out. The time that we had to communicate was at 11:00 at night, after the kids had been put to bed and everything that had to happen in the house had happened. And you're just not at your best then. You're not relating with that person that you love in the ways that you would like to because really you want to be asleep.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: So making the time and space to do that and actually being able to be part of it with a counselor in that space and having someone kind of prompting you and guiding you was really helpful. It took the work out of it.

Lee Rosen: So in your family you never had to twist your husband's arm to go to the counselor. He was into the idea from the beginning.

Jennifer Coleman: True, yes.

Lee Rosen: That may be one of the benefits of being married to a counselor.

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: So you went in for that first meeting and you went together?

Jennifer Coleman: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And was that awkward or anything, or was it very comfortable?

Jennifer Coleman: I would say it was really comfortable, and probably because we had narrowed it down to counselors we thought we would be comfortable with. So I think that's important. I think that when you go to a counselor you should give it two or three sessions. And if you don't feel comfortable, you don't feel like the other person is really understanding you or hearing what it is you want to work on, or helping you design that in the first few sessions, then you should really feel confident and comfortable in yourself to make a change and to just try someone else, because I think fit is very important.

For us, we just really needed -- my husband and I needed the time and the space to just say the things we needed to to each other and an environment to do that in. And so it probably wouldn't have mattered which of those four or five people we narrowed down to we went to.

One thing that was kind of fun with the counselor that we chose is that he had a lot of similarities to my husband that made my husband comfortable, which I think can be more challenging for a lot of couples. This therapist in his off time was a surfer and used a lot of surf analogies. And that made my husband comfortable because it wasn't a professional just using a lot of professional, psychological lingo. It was someone that talked in a very down-to-earth manner and used analogies that my husband could relate to, and that we both could relate to. But I think that kind of rapport with your counselor is important.

Lee Rosen: Did you find in your time with the counselor that you did most of the talking, or vice versa, or was it pretty equal? Between you and your husband, not you and the counselor.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. I think we kept it pretty equal. But I think the reason that happened is that the counselor was there to ensure that we both had equal time and that we both felt heard. It's probably my tendency to talk more and my husband's tendency to listen more. And also, our tendencies tend to be for me to be a firm decision maker and for my husband to be very laid back. And when there's something that he feels very strongly about, then I try to really listen to that and respond because I know that there are very few times that something is important enough for him to step up.

And so that was part of our process is that I didn't want to be making some huge life change with one of us just going along with that and both of us not being complete partners in the decision making, because I know that down the road that can lead to resentments on both sides. If things don't work out the way you hoped, you don't want to be blaming each other. You want to feel that you did the best you could at the time and that you're going to continue to support each other in that. So part of seeing a counselor was about making sure that we had equal time and equal voice.

Lee Rosen: Right. How many sessions did you go to?

Jennifer Coleman: Let's see. I would say it must have been four or five, so not very many. Things went really well and we felt like we were in a better space every time that we went and there just wasn't a need to go anymore.

Lee Rosen: Okay. But that's maybe for you easy to say; there wasn't a need to go anymore. How do we know when we're done? I mean, I would assume the counselor doesn't say, "Okay. You two are cooked."

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I think when you don't need to go anymore is when the issue that caused you to seek out counseling feels resolved, or at least feels resolved to a reasonable level in which you feel comfortable interacting with your spouse. And things should feel better. And so I think for us we just needed the time and the space to think through decisions that we hadn't been making time and space for in our everyday busy life.

For people who are seeking out counseling because they're actually having problems and issues that are more deep-seeded in the ways they relate with each other, if they're not relating well at any time then I think that takes a lot longer. But kind of the same when you're done philosophy holds, is that whatever it is that causes you to seek counseling feels mostly resolved.

Lee Rosen: So obviously you're doing this as a preventative measure, a prophylactic measure, and now you've been through that. Is that something you would do again periodically or would you -- would you just do it or would you wait until you felt like there was a problem, or how would you go about that?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, definitely. I think ideally once a year or a couple times a year having some kind of weekend retreat; a lot of marriage therapists offer those for couples just to brush up on communicating with each other or to kind of summarize where your relationship is. And that may or may not be done through a counseling setting, but I think setting aside time that is specifically to work on the marriage, or just to devote time being with each other, is very important especially if you're raising a family and you have young kids and everything becomes about everything else except the relationship that was there first. And so I think that's important.

Lee Rosen: And I assume -- you had mentioned insurance earlier. Your insurance paid for this?

Jennifer Coleman: Yes, it did. I was surprised because I -- being a counselor myself should know, but in the old days traditional insurance rarely would cover marriage or couples/partner counseling. Usually one individual or the other needed to be labeled as having an issue, anxiety or depression or something that they were going to work on, and then the other person could come along and that was kind of the way to get seen through insurance. But today that has changed quite a lot.

And our insurance, for example, would pay for I think 12 to 20 sessions in a year. And after the first six -- there was a very low co-pay, maybe \$20, and after the first six sessions the co-pay may have increased slightly. But they would pay for 12 to 20 sessions just preventative marriage counseling in a year.

Lee Rosen: Well, all in all it sounds like you had a really positive experience with the whole thing.

Jennifer Coleman: I did. And I would encourage anyone out there to make some inquiries if they think that there's anything to work on in their relationship. You may find that going to counseling is a lot easier than you expect.

Lee Rosen: Well, Jennifer, I really appreciate you talking about this. You know, when we were talking about this interview we were going to do the more traditional you telling us about something that you're an expert in, but I think that probably hearing more of what your

personal experience was will be more helpful to a lot of people, because I do think this is really scary for those of us that don't know about the world you work in every day. We see it as a foreign place and it's just difficult for us and you've given us a lot of insight as to what it's like and what it feels like and how to approach it. So I'm very thankful that you were able to do that for us.

Jennifer Coleman: Well, thanks for having me today, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Well, I just want to remind everybody that we do these shows each week. And in between shows we love to hear from you. We love to hear your comments or questions or suggestions for additional shows. We have a comment line setup that you can call in and leave a voice mail at (919) 256-3083. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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.