

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.



Helping Your Spouse and Yourself Fight Depression

This is Episode number 40 of Stay Happily Married, "Helping Your Spouse and Yourself Fight Depression."

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 have by telephone Dr. -- I'm going to say Dr. Nicole. Nicole, how are you? Welcome to the show.

Nicole Imbraguglio: I'm great. Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: And I say Dr. Nicole because I am just terrible at complicated names. And I want you to tell us how your last name is pronounced.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sure. My last name is pronounced Em-ber-gulia. If you're looking at, the second G is silent and almost pronounced like an A. I know it's a mouthful and I've heard lots of different variations that are really wrong. So I appreciate you just letting me say how my last name's pronounced.

Lee Rosen: Much safer that way. Now, Nicole, you are with LePage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. If you want to go -- you know what I love to do when I'm listening to one of these shows is I sit there and listen on my computer most of the time -- sometimes on my iPod but a lot of times on the computer -- and I'll browse the web. And so if you're looking at the web and you want to know more about Nicole, go to the LePage Associates website. Nicole practices with LePage Associates in Durham, North Carolina and the website is at

LePageAssociates.com. And so you can be looking at that while you're listening to us talk about depression. Hopefully we won't bring you down too much.

But the practice, LePage Associates, works with adults, works with children, deals with a whole wide range of issues. And Nicole has a background of dealing with individuals, with groups, with couples, with families in dealing with everything from mood disorders to substance abuse to life transitions. I feel like I'm always in a life transition of some sort or another.

And Nicole has a master's degree in community and clinical psychology and a doctorate in clinical psychology. So maybe like Dr. Phil, although I don't ever want to compare anyone to Dr. Phil. We'll just refer to you -- you'll be like Cher; you'll be Dr. Nicole as we go forward.

So let's talk about depression. I mean, I assume in your practice this is just a huge topic, that this comes up --

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, absolutely. I would say that most of the clients who come in are either experiencing a form of depression or anxiety. So we see a lot of depression here. And I work with a lot of couples so I see a lot of depression within relationships.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that's what I do is I go from depression to anxiety and then back. That's my system. Right. I'm too anxious to be depressed right now so -- now, what I'm wondering -- and we're joking but this is -- gosh, this is one of the most serious subjects I think we ever talk about.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: But what does it look like in a family? You know, you've got mom and dad and kids. If one of those parents is suffering from depression, what happens in that whole family? What does that feel like to those people?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, depression can look like a variety of different things. One that's pretty typical in a family, like if a mom or a dad is feeling depressed, then you start to notice that maybe they're not doing as many things around the house, where typical chores that are daily chores all of a sudden feel like just a burden. So maybe feeding the dog, that's not getting done. Or you've noticed that things are getting a little dusty or the laundry's piling up.

Because one symptom of depression is a lack of energy, so your energy dips really low. So that can look like a variety of things. So either the mom or dad isn't kind of keeping up with their part of the housework, so then other family members have to start picking up and then they start to feel burdened by their extra responsibilities.

And then they may noticed that the depressed parent is also feeling kind of down about themselves, so they may really be reluctant to say anything. So all of a sudden you have a family who may have been functioning fine in the beginning; now everyone's kind of keeping to themselves, people are kind of scared to bring something up, and then people are carrying around this resentment of extra responsibilities. So that's kind of one way that it can look in a family.

Lee Rosen: When you look at families, are people -- I assume that when depression becomes a problem in a family that it's probably not the first time, most of the time. Is it something that when people look back on it they can see where it has happened in the past and sort of come and gone usually?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, I would say it depends. There are some adults who do experience their first episode of depression in adulthood. So it's possible that this is the first episode of depression. But there are also people who have had a history of depression and maybe even their partner knows that they have suffered from depression in the past and may know things to kind of look out for. But it kind of depends. It can go either way.

A lot of times for your first episode of depression there's some event that has happened right before. So either there's a death in the family or maybe there's a loss of a job. So typically for the first episode there's something that's happened before that has kind of sent that person into a depressed state.

Lee Rosen: Sort of a triggering event.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Sure.

Lee Rosen: And I think I would -- I'm pretty psychologically unaware, so I'm oblivious and my family's moving around me acting like I'm not part of the family half the time. We could spend hours talking about me. But what I'm really wondering is do people get it? Do they realize that it's depression or do they just think, boy, this family kind of stinks right now?

Nicole Imbraguglio: No. I would say it's rare for someone to realize that someone in the family is suffering from depression because we all experience symptoms of depression from one time to another and it's not even depression. Like, all of the symptoms of depression people experience every now and then as just being human. So I think people sometimes are really good at explaining away the symptoms that they're experiencing.

So, "Oh, I had a tough day at work so --" and just kind of like, "So of course I'm not going to sleep well tonight." So when they experience several symptoms at once I think they've gotten so used to kind of explaining away symptoms that they're not realizing that they're experiencing so many at one time.

So I would say that it's not obvious most of the time to people when they're experiencing depression. They typically are aware that they don't feel good. A lot of times people are way more willing to say, okay, well, I have a backache or a stomachache or a headache or I'm just really tired. I hear that a lot, "I'm feeling really tired." But most of the time people aren't realizing that it's depression.

Lee Rosen: Is it sort of the role of your spouse to raise the flag and say, "Hey, we should talk about this"? Is that --

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, that would be great. I mean, ideally that the spouse -- either one of them, the one who's depressed is less likely probably to bring it up because they may not be as aware of it. But it would be great. I mean, that's actually my first piece of advice to someone who thinks that their spouse might be suffering from depression is, yeah, bring the elephant into the room. Say, "These are the things that I've noticed lately. Let's do something about it. We don't have to feel like this anymore."

Lee Rosen: Right. So do you find that people get a welcome reception to that conversation?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, probably not. No.

Lee Rosen: "And by the way --"

Nicole Imbraguglio: That's a very difficult conversation to have because the non-depressed spouse certainly doesn't want to make the depressed spouse feel any more bad about themselves, right? So, no, it's not an easy conversation to have.

And actually, there are some people who come in to see me to kind of prep, "Okay, how do I have this conversation with my spouse?"

And what I typically tell them is just be as supportive as possible. Let them know what their choices are in treating the depression, what they've seen. Offer to come with them to an appointment; that happens a lot. Just really let them know that you're willing to do whatever you can to help them feel better.

Lee Rosen: So probably not best to bring up the fact that they're not doing the laundry or taking out the garbage.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, you can bring that up tactfully as a way of just letting them know the things that you've noticed. Not being judgmental, being like, "God, you haven't taken the garbage out in three weeks." Nothing like that.

But just saying, "Hey, you know what? I've noticed that you haven't been taking the garbage out as often. I'm kind of wondering what's going on lately. I've noticed that you're not maybe feeling so good about yourself."

And just have the communication open because a lot of times the depressed spouse is going to feel like they're burdening people by talking about how they're not feeling well. There's a lot of negativity going on with that person and they don't want to share that because they don't want to bring other people down.

So when the non-depressed spouse can bring it up like that, then they're letting the depressed spouse know, "Hey, it's okay to talk about these things. I'm here for you. It's okay to talk."

Lee Rosen: Right. What goes on with the kids in these houses when one of the parents is really having a big problem with depression? Do the kids -- does that affect their behavior?

Nicole Imbraguglio: It can, absolutely. If the depressed spouse isn't interacting with the kids as often as they used to then the kids may start -- kids are really smart. They know what they need to do to get attention in the house so it's possible that they could start acting up. It's also possible that they kind of take on the role that their parent had in the household. So it could be a child starts cooking dinner and kind of grows up a little bit faster than maybe they need to, to fill in the role that the depressed parent isn't filling anymore.

Lee Rosen: Do you see spouses -- the not depressed spouse -- who just doesn't even -- they don't have a clue that this is what's going on and they just say, "You know what? My marriage stinks and I'm out of here"?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Have you had the opportunity to sort of intercept some of these people who are coming to you, I guess, for counseling about what to do with their lives and say, "Hey, wait a minute. Maybe we could do something about this relationship"?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yes. I mean, absolutely. I think that people do get a point like that. I mean, most marriages aren't ending because people are fighting a lot. Most marriages are ending because they withdraw from each other. And that's how depression can look sometimes, that a depressed person withdraws from their partner and then the non-depressed withdraws as well because the depressed person isn't as fun to be around anymore, they do kind of bring them down sometimes. So we can talk about that. Maybe this person is experiencing depression. And then it's ultimately up to the partner whether or not they want to support their spouse through depression or not.

Lee Rosen: So if I'm the spouse and I'm looking at my wife and I really want to know is she depressed or is she just a difficult woman -- because I'm telling you, we have things in our house that have never been cleaned -- but anyway, what I want to know is, what's the checklist? I want to really get a sense of whether she is or is not suffering from depression. What are the big things that I should be looking for?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, to be suffering from depression you have to feel depressed or down most of the day for at least two weeks. And that's why I want to stress to the audience that you can have a couple of days where you're just not feeling so great. And that's okay. That's just being human. Like there are a couple days maybe you have had a busy day at work and you come home and you snap at someone more than you normally would. A couple of days of that is just kind of being normal.

Now, for depression it has to be for two weeks or longer. So for two weeks this person is feeling depressed or down most of the day nearly every day. Or they can also be more irritable than normal, but general thinking it's irritable for two weeks or longer -- more irritable than normal. And then also --

Lee Rosen: I'll tell you, a lot of guys are going to say their wives are irritable more than two weeks. So check on that one. No, keep going. Don't let me interrupt you.

Nicole Imbraguglio: And that's okay. That's certainly enough to come into couple's therapy for and we can figure out what's going on there.

Lee Rosen: Good. Okay.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Also, people who are depressed will not experience pleasure or joy from things that normally they are interested in. So maybe you're an avid golfer and you're not as interested in golfing anymore; that's one thing they may notice.

Other kind of symptoms that you may notice for depression are difficulties concentrating where 10 minutes -- like your partner asks you to do something and 10 minutes later you can't remember what they asked you to do. Or you find yourself -- it's difficult to follow through a conversation.

Also, another common one is that you're not interested in sex anymore, which brings up a lot of issues for a married couple. You have that kind of lack of energy and then not feeling so good about yourself. So a lot of couples come into couple's therapy because they're not having sex anymore and it turns out that one of the partners is depressed.

Lee Rosen: Right. Anything else on that list of big symptoms?

Nicole Imbraguglio: You'll notice a change in sleeping patterns, like either you're not sleeping enough or you're sleeping too much. And the same goes with appetite as well; you may find a change in your appetite. So you're not eating as much as you normally would or you're eating way too much.

Also feelings of guilt, feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, withdrawing from social activities. So you may not be picking up the phone when friends call anymore or you may not be as talkative with co-workers or not going to happy hour anymore, that sort of thing.

Lee Rosen: So I listened to your list and I decide, okay, my spouse is definitely suffering from depression. And I want to engage in this conversation that we've talked about with them and maybe I'm going to come into you and get some advice on exactly how to have that conversation. But what I'm really wondering is how is my spouse looking at the world? Do they look out from their head and through their eyes and are they thinking, "Golly, I really want to get better; I'm not happy and I want to work that out"? Or are they seeing it in a different way?

Nicole Imbraguglio: No. They're seeing it in a different way usually. Part of depression is feeling like it's never going to get better. You have a hopelessness and a helplessness. So you're thinking that nothing's ever going to

change the way you feel and that you have no control over how you feel. And both of those things aren't realistic because everyone experiences a natural kind of ebb and flow of mood and that's okay. So things eventually will get better and that you do have a lot of control and power and choices over what's going on in your life.

So it's definitely not the kind of outlook like, "Hey, I feel like crap and I know exactly what I need to do to get better." Usually that's not the outlook at all. It's very negative where they are experiencing this feeling like nothing's ever going to get better.

Lee Rosen: Do you get spouses coming in to you trying to get their depressed spouse to come in who just won't come?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, sure. That happens.

Lee Rosen: All the time I guess, huh?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. That happens, definitely. And at that point I encourage the non-depressed spouse to really make sure that they're getting the support they need and that they're taking care of themselves, because depressed feelings can kind of be contagious sometimes. So you want to make sure that you're doing everything you can to keep yourself feeling well and giving the support that you can to your spouse.

Lee Rosen: What do you find that couples do -- it sounds to me like the right thing to do is to come in and talk to a professional who deals with this all day every day. But I'm guessing people try to do things on their own and to figure out a way to get over the hump here and get un-stuck from this bad place. What are they trying to do?

Nicole Imbraguglio: You know, I would say that's rare. The more common pattern that I see is that people do nothing and hope that it's going to get better.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, there's a system, yeah.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Or they keep doing the same things and they just hope that it's going to get better. So one thing I think that some non-depressed spouses do, they'll try to offer words of encouragement that really aren't very helpful but are very well-intentioned, stuff like, "Well, maybe if you just try a little harder to get out of bed," or "if you try a little hard to clean the house." Those sorts of things usually aren't helpful and it just usually makes the other person feel a little worse about themselves.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, I think that's a pretty good point, that most people just hope it'll go away. That's probably our number one approach to most problems.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It hasn't worked for me very well so far, but it's worth a shot. So somebody finally does get into you. What do you guys do to help? First of all, how quickly -- is this a long-term problem or can this be worked on pretty quickly? I guess that's my initial question.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah. It depends on how long the problem's been going on, how engrained kind of these patterns are. So it's not really easy to give a quick answer for that one. If this person has been depressed for years and the marriage has really suffered in that time then the process will take a little bit longer. If you've caught it right in the beginning then it will take less time. So it's difficult to give an answer like that.

And most of the time what I do in the first session is give the couple an idea of from what I've seen in that session how long it will typically take. And of course a lot of this has -- most of this has to do with the couple. The more willing they are to follow my advice and to really kind of do the things that we're talking about in session then the quicker the therapy will work for them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Is it typical that depression -- once you figure out, okay, this is the depression on the part of, say, the husband that is really the thing I need to work on, are you typically going to see husband and wife together or are you just going to see husband at that point?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, it depends. What's so great about our practice here is that I can continue to see the couple while maybe the husband sees another psychologist here for individual work. That's a really common thing that we do here so that the couple is being taken care of as well as the individual issues that the husband is experiencing.

Lee Rosen: Right. And is medication typically involved in dealing with depression? Is that more common than not?

Nicole Imbraguglio: I would say that it's usually more helpful to do a combination of medication and therapy, especially for the more severe types of depression. For the more mild forms of depression talk therapy is effective. And then for the more severe types the best results are going to be a combination of medication and talk therapy.

Lee Rosen: Now, do you find -- is it fairly common that somebody who comes in for help with depression ends up coming back down the road for help with depression again? Does it sort of go away and come back, or how does that play out?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Well, if someone -- let's see. That's a good question. It kind of depends on how far they went in therapy the first time. So what happens a lot is that when people start to feel better they think that they don't need therapy anymore. But a lot of times what's actually happening is that, yes, the depression has lifted but they haven't made the patterns that got them out of the depression a real pattern for them yet. So it's not as engrained as kind of the old way of dealing with things.

So sometimes they will need to come back in the next time they're experiencing depression because they haven't -- I don't want to say fixed the problem, but they haven't taken therapy far enough to really get new patterns settled.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. That makes sense. Well, what else is out there? What else do we need to know about depression? I feel like we've given a pretty good idea of what it feels like in a family and how to attack it and deal with it. Are there other things you feel like we ought to know?

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. I think the number one thing is that depression is highly treatable. It's one of the mental health issues that is the most treatable. So there's no reason to suffer with depression when there are so many great options to help you out with depression.

When you're looking for a therapist to treat you for depression you want to look for a therapist who practices cognitive behavioral therapy or interpersonal therapy; those are the two types of therapies that have been proven by research to be the most effective in treating depression.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Makes sense. I love that when you say it's one of the most treatable things because if you're listening to us today and you're just bogged down in depression and feeling miserable, or you have a spouse that's going through this, it's so wonderful to hear that message of optimism and hope. It makes me feel better just knowing that there's an option out there because I'm sure it's just awful to be living in the middle of this kind of situation.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Oh, absolutely. And another thing that people should know is if you come to one session and you don't like it, that's okay. But just try at least one session to see that things can be better.

Lee Rosen: Well, it is. It's a little bit like standing on the edge of a swimming pool, getting ready to jump in but you're just hesitant. You feel like, "Oh, gosh. It's going to be cold. I know it's going to be good once I get in," but you're a little hesitant to jump in. And I think going to the first session with a psychologist for a lot of us is just a little bit intimidating. So I appreciate you saying that you can go in and give it a shot. And if you like it, come back. And if you don't like it, don't come back.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Absolutely. And if you need to call beforehand and have a conversation with the therapist so you feel a little more comfortable before you come in, that's okay too. Most therapists are more than happy to talk with you on the phone before you come in for your first session.

Lee Rosen: Get a feel for you as a person.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Yeah, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: That's the great thing about you being willing to come on the show is that you've spent 20 minutes with someone now and we do feel a little bit more like we know you and we have a feel for what you would be like in a session. So I think that's pretty neat that you're willing to do that.

Well, I don't know that I have anything else. I feel like we've really given people a lot of information about depression and a really hopeful message. I love that we're ending up on a high note there as we talk about this kind of low topic. So Dr. Nicole, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today. Thank you so much.

Nicole Imbraguglio: Thank you so much.

Lee Rosen: If you want to learn more about Dr. Nicole's practice and her services -- I mentioned this at the outset but I want to mention it again -- the website is LePageAssociates.com. I will put a link to that website in our show notes so you can just click on it from StayHappilyMarried.com. You can also just call her -- call Dr. Nicole directly at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us. I hope that you feel the same way about this topic as I do. I'm very optimistic. It's depressing but I feel much better about it because it does sound like there is a lot that we can do to work on depression and feel better about our lives and to make things work better in our marriages.

So thank you so much for listening. If you have any feedback about this show, I would love to hear from you. We have a call-in line set up for you at (919) 256-3083 or you can send me an e-mail, comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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