

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.



Tending an Empty Nest

This is Episode number 48 of Stay Happily Married, "Tending an Empty Nest."

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 here by phone with Dr. Susan Orenstein, Ph.D. Susan is a licensed psychologist with offices in Cary, North Carolina and in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She specializes in couples therapy, anger management, and also offers services for older teens and young adults. She's been married for 19 years, she has two children, and she has now been a guest on the show a number of times.

I'm really glad to have you back, Susan. How are you today?

Susan Orenstein: I'm fine. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am so pleased that you could join us. You know, we're going to talk about empty nests. What is an empty nest? How is that term used? How do you use it?

Susan Orenstein: Well, how I've heard people use it is when families have their kids go off to college or leave home as they become young adults. And so the parents are empty nesters when the kids leave the nest, so to speak.

Lee Rosen: I would guess that if you have parents that have really been involved with the raising of the kids -- in my life, I mean, it's never ending driving kids here and dropping them off there and arranging this or that -- that that must be quite a shock to the system when

the kids pack up and head off to college or wherever it is they're going.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh. It's a big transitional time for couples and for families.

Lee Rosen: And so what happens to marriages? I mean, I personally -- being in the middle of it right now -- I would think, "Boy, if those kids were gone things would really be fun," you know?

Susan Orenstein: Right. Well, the good news is I think recent research is saying that a lot of couples actually find that they're more satisfied in their marriages, that the day to day stress of looking after kids takes a toll and so there is a relief for a lot of couples. So that's good news. Of course, the couples that come to my practice aren't those; those are the ones that are struggling and having a harder time.

Lee Rosen: So what are they struggling with? I mean, what comes up? What are the bad things, I guess, about the kids leaving?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I think the kids leaving is just kind of the tipping point because the couples I see that are thinking about separating are feeling really lonely and miserable, aren't saying, "Well, everything was fine and then my kids went off to school and I'm empty nest and now we're not fine." I think what they're saying is the past few years we've been growing more and more apart and we've been trying to keep it under wraps and not really focus on this until the kids leave because we don't want to upset the family situation. So now that the last kid leaves the house, now we can take a look at the problems we've been having in our marriage for the past four or five, six years.

Lee Rosen: Right. So all that distraction is gone and now you're focused on things that weren't going so well. I would almost think that level of focus, now sort of thinking, okay, we're shifting gears and focusing on the marriage, would almost be more than a lot of marriages can handle.

Susan Orenstein: And I think this is a time where there are divorces, absolutely; where people say, "You know, we've stayed together for the children and now we want our freedom from each other." And other couples say, "Let's see if we can reconnect through couples counseling and make it worthwhile again."

Lee Rosen: I cannot tell you the number of people that I have met with that stick around -- they'll come in for a consultation and they will decide, "Well, it's only two more years until the last kid goes," or whatever. And they'll stick it out and just see if they can't hang in

there for another couple of years. If you're dealing with somebody like that where they have already sort of been thinking, "Gosh, when these kids are out of here we're done," is there much hope? Are you able to do much for those -- I mean, I get that there's a group that kind of has trouble because the kids are gone and they're adapting to that. And there are some maybe that have this free time now and they want to sort of reconnect. But then what about these people that have just been waiting? Are they sort of doomed; they might as well pack their stuff and go?

Susan Orenstein: Unfortunately I would say some are but I can't tell you that all of them are. So I think sometimes one person has really closed their heart and they're done with the marriage. But at other times they're kind of on the fence and they're just feeling like if they can have some professional marriage therapist like myself offer them some hope then they're willing to get back in the game and get some strategies for reconnecting. So it's yes and no. For some folks it's over and for others that are on the edge, if they hang in there a little longer and really take couples counseling to heart they can find a spark again.

Lee Rosen: This is sort of -- I'm getting slightly off track but I want to ask. When the kids are off at college and the parents then very quickly end the marriage, kids are now freshmen at some big university somewhere and the parents now say, "Okay. Game over. We're out of here." Is that any easier on the kids? I mean, does it really make much difference that now they're gone to college, or is it still pretty difficult for kids to deal with?

Susan Orenstein: I think it's particularly difficult for first year college students that are just working on making that adjustment. So one of my other passions in terms of therapy and who I like to work with is college students, and so there's an overlap with the empty nesters and the college students that I work with. And I think when the college students are particularly vulnerable is that first year away; that's when the dropout rate is really high. And so I think when the kids are worried about mom and dad and worried that they're getting divorced, they might feel like they need to come home more. They may feel that they really can't concentrate and make friends because they might feel guilt, even though that would be irrational. But that is really a hard time for kids.

Lee Rosen: So really, if you're going to be one of these couples that says, "Hey, we're going to wait until the kids are gone," you might want to wait until after the first year of being gone.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Interesting. Because I do. I hear that just all the time, people asking about that. What happens when -- I'm sort of stereotyping here, but you've got mom that has been really engaged with kid-raising and dad maybe has been working. Maybe mom was a stay-at-home mom or doing something like that and now kids are gone. Are there things that moms do to sort of compensate for the loss of the kids that are fairly common?

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh. Well, I think the moms that take care of themselves start to find other interests and fill their time with things and kind of get their own time to themselves back. And so it can be a really positive where women start having more time with their friends, having more time with their spouse, getting more sleep, just feeling like they don't have to rush around everywhere, maybe taking an art class or a dance class. It can be a really nice, positive time for those moms that give themselves permission to really enjoy the accomplishment of raising their kids.

Lee Rosen: If they don't do that, what happens? What do you see happen? Are there commonalities that go on with them?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I see both sides. So I see college students where parents that aren't doing too well -- and sometimes moms that aren't doing too well -- and they might be calling the kids too many times at campus, getting too involved with the kids and making their identity too much about their college student's identity. So I think for those parents it's really helpful that they get some counseling and get some support and figure out how to take care of themselves so that inadvertently they're not hurting their kids.

Lee Rosen: Right. It isn't really an empty nest because the parent becomes one of these helicopter parents or whatever the -- "hover mother" that goes to college. I've read about these folks calling professors and complaining about the kid's grades not being good enough and that sort of thing.

Susan Orenstein: Right.

Lee Rosen: What a nightmare that has got to be for the student, for the kid.

Susan Orenstein: Right.

Lee Rosen: What about dads? Is an empty nest different for dad than it is for mom?

Susan Orenstein: We're just speaking in generalizations and I would say yes because for most families the moms are more of the family cruise director, so to speak, the family social director and more involved. But that is a generalization and so of course there's some dads that really are feeling a loss. But I would say in general it's more of an adjustment for a woman to become a mom and for a woman to have the kids grow up and leave.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so when you see fallout in a marriage -- when it's not one of these things where the couple has been saying, "Hey, if we can just survive until this kid goes to college, we'll get a divorce," but it's a family that things have been going along pretty well and maybe some issues in the marriage but not closely examined, like you said, because the people are so busy -- what does it look like in the marriage all of a sudden when the kids are gone?

Susan Orenstein: Sometimes what I've seen is real resentment, real loneliness, regret that there were so many years where the couple really wasn't a priority. So an example I think of is a husband who just felt so much resentment that the kids seemed to get so much attention and that he felt neglected, and a real yearning for closeness. So unfortunately sometimes I see people just saying they can't wait anymore; they felt too neglected by having the kids and so they'll turn outward for extramarital partners.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, what do you do for these couples? How do you approach it when they show up and the marriage is obviously on the rocks?

Susan Orenstein: Well, it depends on what they want. So part of it is really helping them have a safe, quiet place where they can think about the pros and cons and make a decision of whether they want to invest or not. And for some people, they don't, and that's a place where I can guide them to a really good divorce lawyer, like Rosen Law Firm.

And in other cases I think what counseling's about is inspiring and instilling hope that they can make changes and it's going to be a new chapter. It's not going to be the old marriage, but a new chapter. And so we talk about what developing shared goals, shared passions, shared fun, developing a social life together. And this can be a really positive thing because it's something that each individual really would like to do, but in the counseling sessions we make time to really focus on it and make some goals and some steps towards the goals.

Lee Rosen: You know, I think we all hear about the whole idea of the empty nest being challenging, I guess, but it almost sounds like when you

know this is coming this would be the perfect time to go and see a counselor and just say, "Hey, we're about --" because you haven't really made a transition like this in 20 years. It's been so long since you had kids, you're so used to it, it's like all you see. But it sounds like this would be the perfect time for every empty nester to go in for a tune-up and just sort of readjust and say, "Hey, what are we going to do with the rest of our lives?"

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh. And it could be a really positive experience because you're talking about having more time for pleasure and more resources to share with the couple. So it's actually getting to take back the time and take back the marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. But sometimes this goes awry and I hear a lot of people talk about the whole idea of the kids went off to college, they graduate from college, and today with the economy such as it is these kids become what I'm hearing called "boomerang kids," where they go off to college and then when they graduate they move back into the family home.

We looked this up and we found that, according to the last census, 55 percent of men and 48 percent of women between 18 and 24 are still living with their parents. So clearly, some of those kids are not finishing college and going off and getting a job; they're finishing college, going off and moving back in with mom and dad, and maybe getting a job, maybe not. Are you seeing that?

Susan Orenstein: I am. And I'm seeing sometimes even more complications when the kids have gone away to college and just for lots of reasons couldn't make it and so they're coming back. And those kids are troubled. They may have depression or some drug issues or some learning issues and I've seen quite a lot of those situations and that adds a lot of stress for the parents. So absolutely. I think that is not an uncommon situation nowadays.

Lee Rosen: In a situation like that do you end up -- I mean, I'm assuming in a family where the child, now the adult child, really does have some issues, you get involved with mom, dad, and the kid?

Susan Orenstein: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. But what do you do if it's the kid just -- what do they call it today? Is it Generation Y? There's always a term for it. But if you've got one of these young, 20-year-old kids who maybe just isn't really motivated, what do you do with that? Not really a problem. The kid doesn't have a drug problem or depression and didn't flunk out, but

did fine, but just doesn't seem to want to go rent an apartment and move on.

Susan Orenstein: Right. I think the most important piece there is for the parents to figure out what they're comfortable with as a couple. And if they're comfortable with that son or daughter living with them, they need to figure out what rules they need, what -- for instance, would they expect the adult child to pay rent? Would they expect some kind of curfew? Would they expect them to contribute to the food? Something like that. Or is just none of that comfortable for them and they need to tell the son or daughter, "Go get a roommate. Go get four roommates and work at McDonalds and Starbucks"?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Susan Orenstein: So my role isn't really to tell them what to do but help them be on the same page, that the husband and wife are together on this. Because I've often seen that the adult son or daughter comes in the middle and just causes so much pain.

Lee Rosen: Right. You've got somebody maybe who is missing all that, wants it back, and now you've got conflict between mom and dad over how to deal with it.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh. And sometimes the dad wants to be bad cop and -- dad might want to be good cop but he's cast in the role of bad cop and mom's good cop. And then that can create lots of conflict between the couple.

Lee Rosen: Do you come to the table in that situation with an opinion? I mean, do you think by and large that these young 20-ish-year-olds should be gone, that they should not be coming back? Or are you wide open to whatever?

Susan Orenstein: I could see different options that I think would work as long as the son or daughter is contributing in some way. I think there'd be a big difference between the son or daughter working full time, doing an internship, taking out the trash, being quiet, versus staying in their room watching video games and eating food all day.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Susan Orenstein: So whether they live at home or not isn't as much where I would have a stand. It would be more like what would the expectations be so that there's no free ride. So I'd say I do have a stand against the free ride idea.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, what other ideas do you have for empty nesters? What other things should they know in order to survive this transition?

Susan Orenstein: Having lots of talks about what their vision is, what their goals are, what they would like to do. Developing a social life together I think is very, very important. And these are all conversations that I think are really, really useful, and conversations where people get concrete. So I know we have a few minutes here, a few minutes there and we can talk about big ideas, but I think what happens in my consulting room is that I help people really get down to the details of, okay, what's the plan? What are we going to do? When are we going to start it? Let's try this out. Just like you would have a meeting at work, that we would take it really seriously, although it would be about fun and pleasure.

Lee Rosen: Well, it all sounds good to me. And it does sound like this transition really does beg for the opportunity to go in and figure out what's next. Because I guess really the transition into marriage, and then the next thing you know you've got kids, and then this big -- this is one of the few major, major changes that we have in our lives if we have kids. And it does make a lot of sense to me that sitting down and working through that, regardless of whether you think the marriage is on or off track, it just seems like a good prophylactic measure to sort of jump in there and see what you can do to make sure the next 20, 30, 40 years go well rather than allowing things to drift off course.

So thank you, Susan. I appreciate you being with us again. Really think you've given some good advice.

Susan Orenstein: I enjoyed it. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Well, a special thank you to Dr. Susan Orenstein. She always does a great job and gives us a lot of good information so I'm really pleased that she was able to be here with us today. If you have never visited her website I would encourage you to check it out. It's OrensteinSolutions.com and lots of good information there. I will of course put a link to her site in the show notes at StayHappilyMarried.com. Her office number is (919) 654-7311.

I appreciate you listening today. I hope that we were able to help you out. If you're not yet an empty nester, hopefully you're going to give that some thought as you get closer to it and handle it well. And if you are an empty nester, then hopefully we've given you some ideas for how you might better deal with that.

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If you have comments about this show or any of our shows we love to hear from you. It really does help us out to get your feedback and to hear your ideas about future shows, feedback about guests, just anything. We love to hear from you. You can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. You can also call our comment line and leave a voice mail at (919) 256-3083.

Appreciate you listening. Until next time, stay happily married.

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