

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.



## How To Choose A Marriage Counselor

*This is Episode number 50 of Stay Happily Married, "How To Choose A Marriage Counselor."*

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Glad you could join us.

When I think about going to a marriage counselor, it really is frightening. I don't really know who I would go to and how I would pick somebody. How do I tell if this person is any good? Where do I even go to look? Do I go to the Yellow Pages? Where do I get a referral? How do I know once I'm in the door if the person I'm talking to is any good? I don't want to find out if they're any good like when we figure out that it didn't work and now we're getting divorced. Is there any way to sort of kick the tires like I would if I was trying out a car? Those are all the things that I want to find out.

And so I have on the phone today, Amy McMillan. Amy is a board certified licensed professional counselor. She's worked with the Durham County family court helping with abuse and neglect services. She's also worked in managemental health and opened her own private practice in Cary, North Carolina back in 1999. She also has an office in Raleigh, North Carolina as well.

Welcome to the show, Amy. I'm glad you could be with us today.

Amy McMillan:

Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You know, I want to get to talk about your practice and dig into that a little bit. But before I do that, I am just so dying to know the answer to this question of how do you find a counselor. I've done so many of these shows and I realize now that I know a lot about counseling and how it works and the ins and outs and what people can to be helped. But I don't really know how to go about finding somebody.

You are an insider. You live in that world. You would know who to go to. But the rest of us just have no idea. And I'm wondering what you can tell us; how should we go about finding a marriage counselor?

Amy McMillan: Sure. It's a good question. Most of the people that are looking for counseling are going to go through a website, some kind of search engine on the Web. It's interesting because in the 10 years that I've been in private practice I've recognized the differences in how people find us. In general in our industry, Yellow Pages certainly was a tool back in the beginning when I entered this industry, but certainly not anymore. The website is going to be a key tool for most people.

Another thing is going to be managed care. So lots of clinicians are on panels through the insurance that are going to specialize in what the client is looking for. In this case, marriage counseling, a person would want to go ahead and go through their insurance company and find out who is on that panel, and the managed care company will recommend someone in our industry for that specific need.

So if it was something different from marriage counseling, a person would call their insurance and say, "I'm looking for a clinician that specializes in anxiety," or whatever the presenting problem, and that insurance company will then work to unite the client with a clinician in the area that specializes in that area. Managed care does pose a little bit of a problem because it doesn't give you a lot of information about the clinician that you're going to see sometimes, and you also do not have the confidence of a referral.

The majority of our referrals, especially for marriage counseling, come from the website or word of mouth. So we're constantly getting referrals from previous customers. So just like in your industry, I think the idea that a recommendation from someone that you know and trust can go further than any kind of marketing tool out there in our industry. So a lot of times people will come see a personal recommendation. So those are the three vehicles that you would utilize to find a marriage counselor: word of mouth/

recommendation or referral from someone you know, the website, and/or your insurance company if you can go through that.

Lee Rosen: So do the insurance companies -- like if you call up are they going to give you a lot of choices, or usually are they going to say, well, you really need to see Mary?

Amy McMillan: Sure. It's a good question. It's actually going to vary greatly depending on your particular insurance.

So back in the day when we all had indemnity plans you could basically go to whoever you wanted in the industry, whether it was a podiatrist or a marriage counselor, hand them your insurance card, and you're on your way. Now with the managed care movement, it doesn't work that way at all. Basically, we came in with managed care and decided to form these panels and provider networks so that the insurances could kind of lower their costs and then also dictate who you see, which is not always something that people are agreeable to.

It works out really well if you have a managed care insurance and you call the insurance company and they say, "What is your presenting problem?" You want a marriage counselor and they give you five to choose from. And then out of those five you can narrow your choices by going on the websites and looking at each individual and then making your choice. But sometimes that's not the case, and especially if you have a presenting problem in something that the company does not have a clinician that specializes. So I get a lot of calls with that because I have a few clinicians in our practice that specialize in things that aren't necessarily found commonly amongst all counselors.

So if you needed something such as marriage counseling and you called your insurance company, they would give you a list of network providers typically and then you can choose within that list. If your particular plan only has one marriage counselor on their network provider, then that's the one that you're going to get coverage for. If that's not acceptable then you can go outside of the network, which is dealing with your insurance benefits in a different way, and that's called out-of-network benefits.

So a lot of what I do in my practice, and I'm sure other clinicians do in their practices, is that we educate people on how to utilize their mental health benefits through their insurance. But if you've never used counseling before, you wouldn't know these things, so you basically are picking up the phone and calling your insurance company to really kind of dig in and find out how it works.

Lee Rosen: And I guess if we are running into a roadblock with the insurance company and we actually want to save our marriage, we could just say, "Well, forget about the insurance. If I have to pay, I have to pay." You can always go and see whoever you want to see if you're willing to pay for it at the visits, I guess, right?

Amy McMillan: Oh, absolutely. I have a lot of clients that actually will call, figure out that I'm not on the panels, and then they go through their panels, figure out that the panels don't really offer anyone that specializes in what they need, and then they'll call back and utilize their out-of-network benefit. And quite honestly, the managed care is responding to this concept, so that most insurances do now offer at least some reimbursement on out-of-network providers. So we're seeing kind of a movement in the whole industry of mental health, that it is a very specialized industry and it's a very specialized referral.

If you're looking for a podiatrist or a pediatrician, it might be okay to go to go through your insurance company and just let them make the blind referral. But if you're looking for someone for marriage counseling, it can be a much more specialized referral. And you do end up wanting to use the person that your neighbor recommended, so to speak. And so, I think that the insurance companies are responding to that and offering a little bit of a differential there.

And so for the better plans, I actually work with clients that have out-of-network benefits that are the exact same as their in-network benefits. So they can go with a recommendation from their insurance company or they can choose anyone that they want to see out of the websites or out of the referrals from their friends and still get the same coverage.

Lee Rosen: Now, you talked about going to the people your neighbors or friends recommend. If it were a podiatrist and my neighbor said, "Okay, my ankle was fixed," I'd probably feel pretty good about that. But this does feel a little bit different. My neighbor goes and says, "Okay. Our marriage is all worked out." But their lives may be very different than mine or their problems may be very different than mine. Is a recommendation from a neighbor really that valuable in this context?

Amy McMillan: I understand your question. I think it depends, Lee. It definitely depends on what you're looking for. And for couples that are struggling in their marriage, you hit the nail on the head. They're all dealing with very different problems.

The couples that we see in this industry will come with very different goals with therapy. So it's imperative that a couple recognize what they are expecting to get out of therapy if they are approaching marriage counseling together. A lot of times we'll recognize that couples will have different goals amongst themselves. So I've gotten calls, such as the spouse calls and said that his wife told him if he didn't make an appointment with a marriage counselor by the end of the day, then she was leaving him. So there's certain issues like that that arise where the spouses themselves have different goals for counseling.

But the way to rectify and solve for that problem really is going to be figuring out what the counselor themselves are offering. So once you do choose some kind of search engine, whether it's polling your neighbors or looking on the Internet or flipping through the Yellow Pages, once you do get a handful of marriage counselors' names and numbers then you want to be able to do a little bit of shopping.

If you can get a hold of these counselors directly and ask specific questions, it's nice to be able to use your own screening tools, such as how much experience does this counselor have in this area? What type of assessment does the counselor do on the first visit? The assessment is very important in marriage counseling. It is in all counseling, but especially in marriage counseling because now you have three people in the room, not just two.

And with individual counseling you have two people; you have the therapist and the individual. It's not as much conflicting opinions, not as many conflicting goals. So it becomes more important with three people in the room. A lot of times, the counselor will need to solve for X on the very first appointment, which is to recognize that the spouses may be coming to counseling for two very different reasons. So that initial assessment is going to be pretty important.

And the way to screen for that as the client or the customer is to just really try to get some frequently asked questions out before you ever get out to the first appointment will help you in your selection usually.

Lee Rosen: Things that you would go in prepared to ask is what you're saying?

Amy McMillan: Yes, exactly. Just kind of a tool of your own to say how much experience do you have? Do you run an initial assessment in the direction -- my wife and I have different goals for this therapy; how are you going to help us overcome that? Or do you determine in the first session how many times we will be coming or how long this will take, what are expectations are? These are all things that people

have in their mind but they don't necessarily conceptualize that when choosing the therapist. It's important to know that you and the therapist are going to go over that in those initial appointments.

Lee Rosen: Is it typical in the counseling arena to pay for that kind of an interview session where you want to go in and ask those questions to screen whether this is the right person for you?

Amy McMillan: People ask me that all the time, too. It is typical in the industry for counselors to charge for phone time, just like it would be for attorneys or CPAs, other service industries. However, it is very individualized, depending on the therapist.

So I'll answer for me personally. We are set up in my practice that any kind of incoming inquiries, we can manage those by e-mail pretty promptly and pretty efficiently. Phone calls back to the incoming potential new patients are going to take a little bit longer and our time is limited, obviously. So we can't necessarily spend an entire hour on a phone interview with a client prior to making the initial appointment, but we certainly can give you in about 15 minutes or less the down-and-dirty scoop on how we deal with marriage counseling and kind of help you in that crusade to find the right one prior to coming to the initial appointment. We do that for free. We don't charge for that. Some therapists would, and again, it just varies greatly. So it depends on the therapy group of how they manage those incoming calls.

Lee Rosen: What about credentials? And I don't really want to get into the specific licensing issues, for instance, in North Carolina. I'm sure every state is different. But I know some people have Ph.D's, some people have master's degrees, some people are psychologists, some are social workers. Could you fill us in on at least a general sense of what that's all about?

Amy McMillan: Yeah. I'll give you a very general answer. It is going to vary widely. So that's the general answer. You can't really have a set rule of thumb to go with on the degree compared to the clinician. And the reason I say that is because if we only had, in the state of North Carolina, only clinicians that were educated in the state of North Carolina and board certified in the state of North Carolina, then we would have a very consistent kind of rule of thumb for the different letters behind our names. But because we don't do that -- we allow integration of different programs from different universities all across the world -- there's less of a straight rule of thumb.

What I find when I'm speaking with other clinicians is that their actual program that they attended at the university that they went

to school at will determine about 10 percent, maybe 20 percent of what their philosophies are and what their counseling tools are going to be in an actual session. Then the other somewhere around 60 to 70 percent is going to be made up of their personalities and their experience. So there's only a very small percentage that really is left over out of that quick calculation that I just did that will really speak towards the actual degree.

And so to answer your question, there are social workers; there are Ph.D's in psychology; and then there would be master's in marriage and family therapy, so to speak. So those are three very different degree programs. But all three of those clinicians might be very similar in their approach to marriage counseling. It would depend more highly on those particular clinicians and their experiences and their approaches.

So there's not a real rhyme or reason in terms of the letters behind their names and what it's going to mean to you, hands on in therapy. In general, social workers have more of an agency background, and Ph.Ded psychologists are going to have more of an academic/research background. Then LPCs -- licensed professional counselors -- are going to have more of a private practice flair. And so that is kind of a breakdown but it's a very general breakdown. So you're highly likely to see a Ph.D. and an MSW and an LPC practicing together in very similar ways in marriage therapy sessions, if that's what their specialty area is.

Lee Rosen: Obviously the people that come to see you are having some -- things aren't going well. Do they often get into a dispute about who the counselor ought to be? Or do those folks not even make it to counseling?

Amy McMillan: Oh, yeah. Marriage and couples therapy is a very unique situation in our industry. I enjoy it myself, but we have to train a little separately from what we do with individual therapy. And it's for some of the reasons like what you just quoted; the spouses are having a hard time agreeing on anything. Some will have a hard time agreeing on who to use for marriage counseling. Typically you can have disagreement amongst the consumers, though, and still offer something to each side of the fence and have a good outcome, and that's what we strive to do in couples counseling.

So let's say we find somebody and husband and wife agree; we've got somebody picked out and we come in and we go for a time or two, but we don't really feel like things are going especially well. Is that us or is that that the counselor turned out not to be the right person for us?

Amy McMillan: That's a good question. I always urge people to recognize that there is a bit of consumerism in this industry, even though what we're doing is terribly scientific and objective if we're doing our job correctly. So if I meet with a couple that it's just not going well or the couple are still moving towards divorce versus being happily married, then we have to recognize that there's a major problem going on in the marriage entity itself. It doesn't necessarily mean that has anything to do with the personalities that are in the room.

So the counselor themselves may not be causing that and/or the spouses may not be causing that from a lack of rapport with the counselor. It may be actuality that there are severe financial problems or there could be a terminally ill child in the mix; things that are tangibly and objectively killing the marriage. And so a lot of times, people will pull back from that kind of thing and say, "We went to marriage counseling and that didn't help either." Or, "We really didn't like marriage counselor." And in actuality, it really didn't have anything to do with that, but more that the marriage was faltering for tangible outside reasons.

The other thing that I will say on that topic is that we promote shopping around until you find a good rapport. And so people will come and say, "This is the best fit. I went through two other therapists and it just didn't work out well." And whether that's a personal difference with the actual therapist that they end up agreeing on, or whether they were just more open at that particular moment in their lives and in their marriage than they were the other two times, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that it is a good fit and that you can accomplish something in the counseling.

Lee Rosen: If you've gone a couple of times and both husband and wife, the one thing that they agree on is that this is not the counseling for them or that it's just not working, how does one gracefully withdraw? What do you say to get out of the next meeting? You don't want to just not show up, you know.

Amy McMillan: Yeah. The one thing we don't want you to do is pretend to be okay with what's going on, make another appointment, and then no-show. That's the worst.

So the answer to the question is go ahead and tell the counselor at the end of that session that you aren't feeling like this is helpful and you'd like to take some time before you reappoint. Or you can be even more candid and say, we were expecting X, Y, and Z and this isn't the way that we're going with this. Can we try one more session and see if we can get this and this and this accomplished?

The more candid and the more hands-on and the more clarity that you can be and bring to the sessions, the better, because as a counselor, we're shooting in the dark in terms of what you guys are looking for. And that's why the initial assessment is so important in really defining the goals and making sure everybody's on the same page.

I just recently was working with an individual and she was also working with a marriage counselor with her husband outside of our individual sessions. And she was complaining about how poorly it was going, and I gave her these tips and said, really dig in. And at the next session, prior to the session, you guys take 15 minutes to say what you would want to be getting out of these sessions that you're not. So she and her husband talked about it. They had lunch before the session.

They came up with a list and they walked into their couple's session with the list, gave it to the therapist, and said, "This is kind of more what we were thinking about, and the last three sessions have felt like a waste of our time." And so the feedback that I got at that next individual therapy session with my client was way better and she said it's going really well now.

So it wasn't necessarily the therapist at all that was the problem in that example. It was more that the therapist was misunderstanding and misreading what the couple needed, and the couple wasn't being verbal enough to kind of get across what they were looking for. And so it can be fixed.

But to answer the question, if you really want to bail out, then just say so, because it's not about bailing out gracefully. If the therapist is doing his or her job, then he's not going to take anything you say or do personally. He's always going to be objective and know that this is a service that he's providing. And if he's not providing it well, someone else out there will provide it well, hopefully, for the couple.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now I know that there are lots of schools of thought; different people have different approaches to counseling in general. I assume there are different schools of thought in the marriage counseling arena as well?

Amy McMillan: Oh, definitely.

Lee Rosen: Then how do you know which one is the best one? Because I only want to go to the best one.

Amy McMillan: Of course. Well, "best" is a relative term. So when I think schools of thought, I'm thinking way more objective. So if I named three schools of thought in marriage counseling, what would they be?

Lots of couples come wanting to know if we are Christian counselors. So a lot of people will implement their religious beliefs into their counseling process.

Maybe a different school of thought would be relying heavily on what type of clinical background one has. So I've actually had people come and say, do you use reality therapy? Do you use cognitive behavioral therapy? Are you familiar with EMDR? And so these are clinical backgrounds which some people don't have any clue what I was just talking about there.

Then maybe another school of thought would be, we really want someone that's hands-on. We want someone that's going to jump in, roll their sleeves up, give us homework, tell us what we're doing wrong, tell us what we should be doing, tell us if we should get a divorce.

And so I think the school of thought question is kind of more about the couple and their personality traits, their communication styles, or lack thereof, and what they're looking for in a couples counselor is going to be dictated by what they've been looking for in their marriage and not being able to find that with each other. And so they end up in a counseling session.

But yes, certainly it's subjective; because for you to say you only want the best one, that would mean that you are looking for the best one for you and your wife. You're looking for the one that clicks with you and your wife. You're looking for the one that's going to match the lifestyle that you have with your wife. And so in that way, we are trained to be chameleons. We are trained to understand and administer to different lifestyles.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. Makes a lot of sense. So we're coming to counseling and things are just miserable. They started bad and they're not getting any better. I'm unhappy, my wife's unhappy, and we've been a handful of sessions and we are still unhappy. When do we know enough is enough? We need to no longer try this and we've done everything we can. Let's pull the plug on this marriage.

Amy McMillan: Sure. Well, I think that people are going to benefit from recognizing that there are three different entities here. There's the husband and wife, and there's the third entity, which is the marriage. And it's really important for the couple that's seeking marriage counseling

to recognize that it's that third entity that really gets the energy and the focus. So being able to save a marriage, per se, or recognizing what it's going to take for those two individuals to perceive that their marriage has gotten better or healthier or is still savable, it's a very subjective thing.

A lot of times it will come down to the two individuals believing that there is some feasibility for change. And as long as there is still a belief that there will be some change or that there could be some change or that change may be feasible, then people will tend to tough it out. If one party gets to the point where they just really don't believe that anymore, that's where I find that they're turning to the divorce attorney. And so when that happens, it's important not to feel personally like a failure, and it's important not to feel that the couple's therapy has been a failure.

Many, many successful couples therapy relationships that we have in this industry will actually end in divorce. It wasn't successful marriage counseling, but it was successful counseling because people were able to come to a neutral place and amicably be able to dissolve their marriage after feeling like they had given it 110 percent of a try; versus if people never do seek counseling, a lot of times they will go off into the horizon and get a divorce and saying, "I wish we would have tried counseling." Or people that will come to counseling and end up in divorce, they're going to be able to utilize their therapist as a neutral party to help them with degrees of separation, whether it's working through visitation with their children or separation of property. A lot of times they will end up utilizing the marriage counselor as a sort of mediation if the proper releases are signed and the marriage counselor is available to speak with the attorneys and/or the mediators.

So I think marriage counseling per se is not there just to save a marriage, but more to save the sanity of the parties that are involved in working towards staying happily married. A lot of times people are so miserable by the time they go to a marriage counselor. If you had a thermometer and you could measure the life left in the marriage itself, it would be pretty dead because we tend to do that. We wait until it's pretty far gone to reach out for help. And if that couple does end up getting a divorce, it's not necessarily that they're going to end up feeling like the marriage counseling was a failure because they were able to go to counseling to actually clarify that it's time to get divorced. So you can actually use the marriage counseling in different ways other than to just try to stay married.

Lee Rosen:

Right. Now, I know you've got to get back to saving people's sanity, so I just have a couple of quick last few questions.

As the counselor do you ever say, "I can't handle you people"? It's not the couple deciding you're not the counselor for them, but you deciding this is not a couple that -- you just can't deal with these folks anymore. Does that ever happen?

Amy McMillan: I certainly enjoy working with some more than others, and there is a personality that usually will not click quite as well. But I do think that it's more objective to talk to a couple that seems that they're beating their head against the wall. We always joke and say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. So they'll come and argue on the couch with each other in front of the couple's therapist and nothing seems to be getting accomplished.

In those cases, we do recommend, we will say to a couple, "Hey, we've tried some different angles. We don't seem to be making any progress. Let's give it two more sessions and at that point I really think that I can make a recommendation for a different clinician. And let's get somebody else on board and see if that will be more helpful."

I don't think that I would ever say to someone, "I don't know what to do with you guys and I cannot help you anymore." Although, I have had clients tell me that therapists had said that to them. I'm always shocked and appalled because I think it is our goal to help people in this industry and we really do have to see that through to fruition, even if that's referring to someone else.

I actually had a couple tell me that they got kicked out of therapy. So the idea with this couple was that their marriage was so bad that they actually got kicked out of therapy. And in reality, the marriage therapist had basically said what I just said, which was, he was making suggestions to them and they were in a stuck place and not really ready to receive those suggestions. So he suggested that they not come back and waste their time and money anymore.

But I think it's more important that we recognize that sometimes it's not about the therapy or the therapist not liking you or your marriage being so bad that it's unfixable, but more that you're just not open to the process of therapy being a tool at that moment in time.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, Amy McMillan, thank you so much for being with us and sharing your ideas about how to choose a marriage counselor. I feel like I know a lot more than I did half an hour ago. I appreciate it.

Amy McMillan: Thank you, Lee. Thanks for having me.

Lee Rosen: You can find out a whole lot of additional information about Amy at her website. She actually has two of them and we will put a link to them in the show notes. One of them is for the practice at Cary Behavioral Health Care. That website is at [CaryBehavioral.com](http://CaryBehavioral.com). And her Raleigh practice has a website called [BelieveInTherapy.com](http://BelieveInTherapy.com). And I will put a link to those at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com) so that you can click right over to them. You can also call her office, of course. The telephone number is (919) 755-0545.

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