

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.



Sleeping With Your Spouse

This is Episode number 63 of Stay Happily Married, "Sleeping With Your Spouse."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

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- Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm have on the telephone from Durham, North Carolina, Dr. Tina Lepage. Tina is the founder of Lepage Associates in Durham and she specializes in personal and professional relationship issues. She deals with children, with adolescents, she does family counseling. She's a licensed psychologist and she has a doctorate in clinical psychology, and significantly to the show -- and I always am pleased when our guest is not only an expert in marriage but is also married. So she's married.
- And Tina, welcome to the show. How are you doing?
- Tina Lepage: Thanks, Lee. I'm doing great today.
- Lee Rosen: Now, I mentioned that you're married. You've been married a long time, right? How long?
- Tina Lepage: Let's see. I have been married since 2000 and we dated off and on before that for 14 years. So I've known him for a really long time.
- Lee Rosen: That's a whole other show. Fourteen years of dating. Right. Yeah, I can't wait to dig into that. I had no idea.
- Tina Lepage: See, now you know something new. And I should add to your intro too that since we're talking about sleep that my husband is a big snorer and I'm a light sleeper.

Lee Rosen: Well, see, I need to spend more time with him because that is what we need to talk about because I am a big snorer. And what happens in my life is that my wife kicks me to make me stop snoring. And it's a nightmare; it really is sort of a nightmare. You see all these commercials about snoring and you know why people are interested in buying all those products.

Tina Lepage: Sure. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: You have a daughter. How old's your daughter?

Tina Lepage: She's going to turn 5 in June.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Just about to turn 5. Well, let's dig into this sleep thing. And so your husband's a big snorer, you're a light sleeper. This has been the case forever? This has been driving you guys crazy?

Tina Lepage: This was -- yes, this has been the case since we've been married. So he's been, yeah, snoring for the last nine years.

Lee Rosen: Wow. And what do you do to him?

Tina Lepage: You know, I can talk to him and say, "Hey, honey. Turn over." So sometimes if he switches positions. But generally I won't do that more than once or twice. We've kind of gotten to a place with it now where we have an ebb and flow of how to deal with the snoring. So I may say to him, "Hey, honey. Turn over." And if he turns over and he stops snoring, great; I just go back to sleep. And if he keeps snoring then I go to the guest room.

Lee Rosen: Right. And I want to talk all about all sorts of sleep issues, but people theorize -- a lot of people will blame the snorer and will say, "If you would lose weight you would snore less." And I think your husband is a -- I've met him before and he seems like a pretty fit guy.

Tina Lepage: He could lose a few pounds but he's doing okay.

Lee Rosen: Well, I weighed about 220 and dropped down to about 160 almost 10 years ago. And I'm down about as low as I can go in my height.

Tina Lepage: Right.

Lee Rosen: And the snoring did not change at all.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. I think one important thing that you bring up is that things like snoring or moving in your sleep -- if we're talking about sleep

problems that couples deal with, they really need to distinguish between how they deal with things that the person can't change in the moment. Because snoring, maybe losing weight will help, maybe losing weight won't help; but the point is when the person is asleep and snoring, that's not a behavior that they can just change on their own. So if it's snoring or moving at night in bed when you're asleep, those aren't behaviors that you can expect somebody to change.

Now, if you're trying to negotiate things like what you set the temperature at or whether you keep a light on to read or not, those are things that you can negotiate. But the other things, it's really helpful to not look at them as something that the person should be blamed for.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I'm going to quote you on that and take a copy of this home. Are there other things -- you know, snoring obviously. Everybody talks about that. But are there other things that go on during sleep that are causing people to come and talk to you and meet with you?

Tina Lepage: Snoring is by far the big one that people will bring up in couple's issues. Sometimes somebody's just a very restless sleeper. Aside from that, what people bring up as a sleep issue is different bedtimes, that that sort of drives couples crazy sometimes. So those are really the big ones: the snoring, moving, and then having different bedtimes.

Lee Rosen: So the different bedtimes, because some spouses want both to go to bed simultaneously, is that the issue?

Tina Lepage: Sure. So one spouse will want them to go to bed together so that there is more intimacy or just cuddling time or talking or just because they have in their head a vision of marriage and that's what should happen, that you should go to bed at the same time. And so if one person likes to stay up late at night then that can be difficult on the other spouse.

Lee Rosen: Well, I may snore but I go to bed when I'm told.

Tina Lepage: See? You can go home and tell Lisa that.

Lee Rosen: Very interesting. So you've got the bedtime. Anything else? Any other biggies we're overlooking aside from the ones you mentioned?

Tina Lepage: I don't think so when it comes to sleep. Those are the ones that people tend to talk about the most.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And what goes on in the marriage? Like, is this something that kind of builds up until it explodes? Or how does it play out?

Tina Lepage: You know, it's one of those things that people -- newlyweds will tolerate it, but newlyweds will tolerate a lot. So they'll tolerate it for a little while but I think that people start to discuss it fairly soon because what happens is if it leads to sleep deprivation then it's hard for people to be pleasant when they're over tired and not being able to sleep at night. So I think it is something couples start to talk about.

Now, whether they resolve it and come up with a good way to deal with it or whether it goes on for years and it frustrates them, those are different.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you mentioned that sometimes you will abandon ship and head for the guest bedroom.

Tina Lepage: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Well, if we look at sort of two scenarios, on the one hand you've got somebody that just won't discuss it, won't bring it up and just suffers through it; and then you've got these other couples, I guess, where somebody does head out and goes and sleeps in the bedroom. What are the problems that couples face when they're taking those approaches?

Tina Lepage: Well, the first one -- I mean, you really for the most part don't want to feel like you're suffering through anything in life. I mean, you can suffer through a day of something but if your partner snores and you can't sleep you really are going to be pretty miserable if you think you're going to suffer through a lifetime of that. So that's probably not the best answer.

I think just instead of suffering, coming to some point of acceptance and saying, okay, this is what happens at night. What can we do to make this so that we both get a good night's sleep? And just tackling it as any scientific problem. Okay, here's the problem and try some different solutions and come up with something that works for that particular couple.

And sometimes it's not just coming up with the thing that works but it's changing the way you think about things, because for some people it's very frustrating for them to think that, "Oh, we're going to sleep in separate beds." That may be very meaningful to somebody that they need to sleep in the same bed as their spouse every night and that they find that -- what some spouses say when they come in is, "It's sad for me to think that we're going to sleep in

separate beds." And so sometimes it's not just doing something differently but then it's also how you think about it is really impacting the situation.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, do some of the families you're dealing with -- does one spouse or the other feel like they just can't bring it up, that that would be like they were attacking their spouse?

Tina Lepage: Well, sure. We've had some people -- especially if it's something like snoring or moving in your sleep, we'll have one spouse who might say, "Well, I don't want to say anything because what can he do about it?" It's usually the husband who's snoring, but not always. So the woman might be here saying, "Why bring it up? It's not like he can do anything about it."

Then why bring it up? Because you're a couple so you can hopefully bring it up in a way that isn't attacking to the other person but is more just sharing your experience and maybe then working together as a couple to talk about how you can solve the problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. I would think sleep -- there's a certain level of amusement about all of this. But if you don't get enough sleep -- like for me, when I'm snoring, I'm really sleeping very well.

Tina Lepage: Yes.

Lee Rosen: But if your spouse is not sleeping properly because of this, I would assume that that really does build up and become a pretty big marriage issue where somebody is really not getting their physiological needs met. So do you sort of see it blowing up out of control for many couples?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. What happens if you're sleep deprived, that's a big problem. And then you start to have anxiety around it because the one who's sleep deprived starts to anticipate that, okay, it's bedtime; I'm not going to get enough sleep. And so sleep and the whole ritual of going to bed with each other becomes not good because that's going to be the result. And because also in bed there's sex and intimacy and all of that, you don't want the going to bed together to become not good. So it really can be a problem in that sense.

And for the person who's snoring, you say if you're getting kicked all the time, etc. So that person can be thinking the same thing, like, oh, great, now we're going to go to bed and she's going to be miserable and --

Lee Rosen: And I'm going to get kicked.

Tina Lepage: Right. And I'm going to get kicked.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's great. It's really wonderful. Yeah. Well, do you ever meet with a couple and say, hey, look, you guys really just need separate - separate bedrooms will solve this problem? This marriage is fine but you just can't sleep in the same room.

Tina Lepage: I haven't seen a lot of spouses that completely have different bedrooms. And I don't really recommend that. Now, certainly, having said that, different things work for different couples. So if for somebody out there having separate bedrooms was the answer and they still had time in their relationship where they have time to talk and cuddle and -- they still sort of protect those other things but they don't have to do them at the moment they're going to sleep, then I think it would be okay.

But instead, what I usually talk to people about is to still try to have the same positive bedtime ritual. So, okay, you're going to maybe go to bed together, although as a practical approach sometimes the light sleeper will go to bed first because if they're already asleep the snoring doesn't bother them as much. But basically to sort of have the same bedtime ritual and then if sleep isn't happening one person might move to the other room. Because then the other room is just being functionally used for sleep.

And then I would suggest in the morning when whoever wakes up, to go climb in bed with the other spouse so you have a little time in the morning to still hug, say good morning, etc., and then go on with your day.

So you can use the other bed purely for sleep and then if you think of it that way it's not really interfering with the nighttime ritual or the morning ritual.

Lee Rosen: Right. So it works. It's just the backup plan for when the thing -- whatever it is that's driving you crazy -- is happening.

Tina Lepage: Right. And I'll say, though, from a practical standpoint too that it makes a difference when you have a guest room. So when we were young it was who's going to go to the couch? And that's very different then who's going to go to the comfortable bed in the guest room. And so it can be harder on younger couples or people who don't have -- all their beds are filled with kids or whatever and they don't have another comfortable space to go to.

Certainly when we were younger we would take turns. So if he was snoring I would wake him up if it was his turn and he would go to

the couch and we would take turns. Now that we have a guest room, I say why wake him up? I'm already awake.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is complicated. It's a lot more complicated than you might imagine when you think about it because it really isn't funny, I think, when people are not getting their rest and this resentment is starting to build up. Is it a fairly common scenario -- well, I guess I wonder if when people are coming to see you if you have to kind of dig in to discover that this might be the root of part of the problem or something, or if people just walk in the door and say, "I can't sleep. This person is snoring."

Tina Lepage: Well, I tell you what. Actually, people will talk about this pretty readily. It doesn't feel as personal or private to them as some of the other things that are couples issues. And so they'll say this. Now, whether they recognize how much it's impacting their connectedness, etc., is another thing; but they'll actually talk about it pretty freely.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it feels more like a medical sort of problem than an emotional sort of problem, I guess, in a way.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. People will come in and describe it. It's the type of thing that - if you think about it, it's the type of thing you might even joke with friends about that, "oh, she kicks me" or "he snores," but you wouldn't just bring up other personal things that way.

Lee Rosen: Right. Interesting. Although the world keeps changing. More and more personal things become the subject of TV commercials so --

Tina Lepage: It's true.

Lee Rosen: You sound like a pretty big advocate of there being a marital bed. I mean, it sounds like you feel pretty strongly that that is an important part of having a happy marriage, true?

Tina Lepage: I think that's true for most people.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Okay. So you wouldn't ditch the idea -- you're going to really work to get people back into the bedroom if they can possibly do it and survive and sleep. That sounds like a good position.

Now, let me ask you this. When someone comes and talks to you what are the first steps that you advise them to take to start resolving this problem? What do they do to get on track?

Tina Lepage: Well, we kind of separate the things that can be controlled that are just behavioral things like keeping a light on to read, those types of

things that I talked about -- bedtime, etc. -- we separate those from things like snoring and moving in your sleep. The things then that they can control we just talk about, okay, so how can they come to a compromise on this for a couple? Does the light only stay on for 20 minutes for reading or do they stagger their bedtimes some day or do they go to bed together and if one of them can't sleep they get up and go read on the couch? So they just try different things to see what works on that ends.

And if it's the snoring/moving in bed thing, then we have to try more things like -- some women, if they go to sleep first they really can sleep through the night with their partner. The snoring won't wake them up at all and so there may be things like that that they can do. The moving around, if one person moves a lot sometimes buying one of those body pillows and putting it in the middle, basically, and sleeping that way, sometimes that can work. So we kind of just take a trial and error approach and see what works for them.

And then, like I said, often times there's a piece of that of getting them to an acceptance level where they can accept, hey, this doesn't mean anything negative about our marriage. Let's say the body pillow. Some people might think, "Oh, but that means we're not hugging at night." Well, no, but you can hug when you go to sleep. When people are ready to absolutely fall asleep, put the pillow there and then take it away in the morning. So changing their thoughts about things so that they feel okay about it and feel positive about it.

Lee Rosen: Don't you feel like, though, that one spouse -- like using the snoring scenario -- that there are a limits as to how far you can go and how much you can adapt and change and compromise? I mean, at some point you kind of run into a wall with all of that, don't you?

Tina Lepage: With snoring?

Lee Rosen: Well, or with anything. I mean, do we really -- are you required to adapt forever and change forever or can we not -- what are the limits?

Tina Lepage: That's a great question. Probably if you intend to be married forever you always have to be in the mode of being able to adapt forever. That might just be that people should just realize that and move forward.

I think when you're saying that -- like, how much adapting can they do, etc. -- I do really think that people can work out the snoring thing if they get over thinking negatively about it. Because I think

ultimately if it comes right down to it you can sleep separately and still have a very connected marriage, even for somebody who had to sleep separately every night.

Like, I know for a lot of couples we put some of these things into place so that what ends up happening is that many nights they are able to sleep in the same bed together and some nights they have to be apart. But I think even if you were a couple that had to sleep apart every night, that's not the crux of your marriage, the eight hours that your eyes are closed and you're asleep.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I feel like we've covered a lot of important stuff here on sleep. Is there anything else people really need to know about sleeping with their spouse or do you feel like we've given the information we've got?

Tina Lepage: I think this would really get people going. I think if people just remember the takeaway message is separate the things that the person can control and not control. The things that can be controlled, just sort of work out some compromises with those. And the things that can't be, just use some trial and error to figure out -- if it can't be controlled what you're trying to figure out is how you can each sleep. Because then you just want to have those functional hours of sleep and in the end hopefully feel good about it and not be upset and just be able to say, "Okay. This is good. We're sleeping and we're happily married."

Lee Rosen: Right. Fantastic. Well, I have a feeling that my wife will somehow use this information in such a way that she gets to sleep better. You know, I'm sleeping fine but I'm guess there --

Tina Lepage: Well, I hope she does because --

Lee Rosen: -- there's more compromise.

Tina Lepage: -- if your wife is happier, Lee, then that is always good for you.

Lee Rosen: Then I'll be happier. Right.

Tina Lepage: Yes.

Lee Rosen: I may not be sleeping but I'll be happy as a clam. Right.

Well, Tina, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it.

Tina Lepage: Sure. Thanks for having me.

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Lee Rosen: You should definitely check out Tina's website. It's LepageAssociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And there is a lot of great information about Tina and her staff and the services they offer. There are a bunch of articles. There are links to other resources. You can also get in touch with her by calling her office at (919) 572-0000.

Now, I have something I wanted to say to you. You are the folks that are still listening. You've made it to the end of the show. You've invested 20 or so minutes with us. And what that says about you is that you are passionate about making your marriage work. You are the people that we are doing the best we can to provide this information. You're the people we're thinking about when we're putting these shows together. And what I would really appreciate from you is feedback.

I need as much feedback as you can give about whether these shows are working for you, whether we're giving you the right information, whether we're going into enough detail, whether we're making it practical enough; or whether we're not, whether we need to make some adjustments on all of those things. I need to know what things you want to learn about, what topics are important to you, who our guests ought to be. You're the people with the most passion, the most energy for making your marriage work and you are the people that we're doing this for.

So your feedback is especially important and would really, really be appreciated. You can give us feedback by leaving us a voicemail at (919) 256-3083, or you can send us e-mails 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.