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Your Fat Spouse

This is Episode number 72 of Stay Happily Married, "Your Fat Spouse."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here in the studio with Dr. Susan Orenstein. She's a licensed psychologist with a private practice in Cary, North Carolina and recently opened a second location in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Welcome back to the show, Susan.

Susan Orenstein: Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really glad you could join us today. And this topic we're talking about -- Your Fat Spouse -- I bet you don't like that that's what we've called the show.

Susan Orenstein: I don't like that that's what you've called the show.

Lee Rosen: Well, you're a lot more politically correct than maybe -- we'll blame it on Ned, the producer of the show. How's that?

Susan Orenstein: Poor Ned.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. But maybe we should be saying "Your Overweight Spouse" or something. And I don't want to upset anybody by that so I'm sorry for saying "Your Fat Spouse." But that really is kind of what we're talking about.

I mean, people get married and everybody looks good and you hear women especially going on about losing a little weight so they can squeeze into their wedding dresses. And I think husbands, fiancés, men worry about that for their wedding as well. But people do, especially it seems like in that maybe first year of marriage, they pack on some tonnage there, don't they?

Susan Orenstein: They do.

Lee Rosen: And doesn't that sort of -- if it's both of them I guess -- and that's probably what my wife and I did. We probably both gained weight in the first year. But if it's only one of them, that's got to kind of be a turnoff, huh?

Susan Orenstein: It can be. For some couples it becomes a big issue, but not in all couples. So a lot of the things we'll be talking about will affect some people certainly more than other people.

Lee Rosen: Well, and that's just the beginning of the marriage. I guess that happens in some couples and doesn't in others. But you do see fairly commonly marriages where over the years somebody has really put on a lot of weight and maybe the other one hasn't. I mean, that seems to be kind of the rule. I mean, I see a lot of couples where at least one spouse has gained a lot of weight.

Susan Orenstein: Right. And actually, there was some research that just came out maybe a month ago or so saying that married couples end up having more issues with weight and gaining weight than couples who aren't married. And that was interesting. So there's several theories about that.

Lee Rosen: So marriage causes weight gain?

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Well, if every wife cooked like my wife does that would definitely -- I mean, it's actually -- I'm pretty lucky that the food is so fantastic.

Okay. So what happens? What happens in marriages when somebody's gained a lot of weight? What's the fallout to the relationship?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I think it depends on the reason. First of all, a lot of times both people gain weight. I mean, maintaining a healthy weight is a huge challenge in our culture in America so if you can do that you're going against the tide to begin with. But often it's just our habits -- our lifestyle habits. And when people get married they're often at a

certain age, maybe their 20s or 30s, and they're going to be gaining weight because their metabolism's going down. They could be working lots of hours and not having as much free time to be active and fit. They're sitting down together eating meals and sometimes when people sit down to eat meals they eat more. Also, people --

Lee Rosen: As opposed to, like, eating in the car.

Susan Orenstein: Yes. Right. It's kind of counterintuitive. Sometimes where there are emotional difficulties one person will turn to food or maybe turn to alcohol; and people can gain weight drinking also. A lot of times it's lifestyle. People are on the Internet, the TV, just very sedentary lifestyle, eating out a lot.

So sometimes it's kind of lifestyle and the issues where -- how we take care of ourselves in America, how we eat and how we take care of exercise. And then sometimes it is more of an emotional issue that has more pertinence to do with the relationship and the couple.

Lee Rosen: So lots of ways that -- or lots of causes, I guess, behind it. Do you see many couples where the relationship really does start to unravel because somebody is just getting so obese that things just aren't working anymore?

Susan Orenstein: Yes. You could say there's a chicken and egg kind of factor. Is the person having more and more of a weight struggle and that's causing the relationship issue, or is the relationship struggle causing them to turn more towards food? And it's kind of a chicken or egg cycle.

Lee Rosen: Well, which is it? Is it the chicken or the egg?

Susan Orenstein: I think it's both.

Lee Rosen: A little of this. A little of that.

Susan Orenstein: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Really? Would you say -- I can understand certainly if your relationship is going down the tubes eating is one way to cope, I guess, or deal with that.

Susan Orenstein: Right. And somebody could have an issue from childhood where they turn to food as a coping mechanism and would be struggling with their weight. And their partner can either be supportive and help them make that better or make sure it doesn't get worse, or it could become exaggerated with the way the partner responds.

Lee Rosen: So I can understand -- I guess there are two sides to this struggle. I mean, if you're the spouse that is the skinny spouse -- we'll call that person, the one who hasn't gained the weight -- I can certainly imagine those folks are thinking my spouse is no longer physically appealing. Although you hear everybody say, it's like, I love you for who you are, not what you look like. Is that true or do we really love them for what they look like?

Susan Orenstein: I think it depends. So I think for -- I hear a lot of couples say that they are as attracted as much to a spouse when they've gained weight and it's not really troublesome to them. And then I hear other couples say that when the partner gains weight it really is a turnoff.

But I think what's important either way is how the person who's gained weight feels about themselves because I think that may be even more important because if that person starts to feel self-conscious and unattractive and undesirable then their partner picks up on that too.

Lee Rosen: And so they might -- I guess they could become -- you really have two very different issues with each of the spouses. One person may be feeling one way about the relationship and the other one may be having issues with the relationship because of the fact that they have gained the weight.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: So as an expert, as a psychologist, do you see couples like this together or is this the kind of thing where they both have their own agenda; they need to see someone like you separately? Or how does that play out?

Susan Orenstein: I think folks can come to me from different angles. So sometimes I'll see a couple where there's a crisis like an infidelity and it turns out there has been intimacy issues and one person's gone outside the marriage. And so those are really, really painful.

And then other times I'll see sometimes new moms who are struggling with weight gains and they are coming in with all kinds of issues, including intimacy issues and weight concerns. So it can present itself in my office in different ways.

Lee Rosen: Lots of different ways. Is there a difference genderwise? Do men and women respond differently to their spouse gaining weight?

Susan Orenstein: Wow. Good question. I have seen really such opposite ends of the spectrum. I will see some folks who absolutely want to be intimate with a heavy spouse and they say it doesn't matter at all. And others will say it will matter. And I don't see that it's on gender lines but I can't say that it has --

I would say, though, that in general women feel more affected by weight gain, I think because of the cultural messages about looking a certain way, fitting in certain size clothes, that it seems to me like women are much more self-conscious about weight gain and it affects their identity more. Like if you asked a woman how much she weighs I think that would be a very dangerous question.

For instance, men will tell you -- no big deal -- how much they weigh. They talk about athletes and how much they weigh and sometimes the bigger the number, the better. So it's a very different mentality.

Lee Rosen: So is it safe to say as a guy that I can gain weight and worry less about my spouse ditching me than a woman?

Susan Orenstein: Oh, my goodness.

Lee Rosen: I'm just thinking about dessert tonight.

Susan Orenstein: Gosh, that's a tough question. Hmm. Ditching your spouse.

Lee Rosen: I mean, the stereotype really is man ends relationship with wife because she's gained so much weight. You don't hear stories -- at least, I don't hear them as often -- where wife has left husband because he gained so much weight. It feels that way, but I don't know. You're out there on the front lines.

Susan Orenstein: I don't hear it as often. I mean, sometimes I will hear women frustrated about their husband's appearance, hygiene, things like that that would make him desirable and sexy and attractive. I think if he's eating chips and leaving the chips on his shirt -- but maybe not so much about the actual weight. So I think you're right; it may be more the men leaving the women. But many men are very loyal and that will not affect them.

Lee Rosen: Some folks have a few extra pounds and it doesn't really affect them in any -- they just don't look as attractive, I guess, or they have some -- maybe they get winded going up a hill or something. But I assume that there are people you've seen where they've gained so much weight that their ability to be sexually intimate is impaired. Is that -- I have no idea, so you tell me. Does that happen?

Susan Orenstein: Actually, so there is some research showing that when men are very, very obese that it does affect their testosterone and their libido, sure. And other things affect people's libido too. Actually, antidepressants affect men and women's libidos -- many antidepressants -- and they also cause weight gain. So there are several things that can be coexisting.

Lee Rosen: So you have a lot of issues in this package all mixed together.

Susan Orenstein: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Okay. When somebody has really gained a lot of weight in a marriage do you find that the spouses are talking about it? Is there nagging? I mean, that's the sitcoms; there's always a wife nagging a husband about don't eat that or something. Does that go on?

Susan Orenstein: Great question. Yes and no. So there is indirect talk, the talk that leaks out. But I don't really see direct, caring, eye-to-eye communication. It usually leaks out in terms of comments, maybe sarcasm, hurt, things like that.

Lee Rosen: But not a lot -- it's really a negative kind of communication.

Susan Orenstein: Unfortunately it is. And sometimes it can seem kind of like the person who's concerned about the person with the weight issue might take on kind of a parental role and treat the person with the weight issue kind of like a child or teenager. And that situation absolutely doesn't work. People feel degraded and resentful and --

Lee Rosen: Like when I'm sitting there in my La-Z-Boy and my wife says, "Back away from the chips, Fat Man."

Susan Orenstein: Yeah, I would think so.

Lee Rosen: I don't feel the love.

Susan Orenstein: No, I wouldn't think so. Unless you asked her to do that. Now, sometimes couples really -- they'll want to support each other through a different lifestyle change and so they'll ask each other, "Please point it out," or "remind me." And that can go fine. I think it's about asking for permission to help each other and be supportive.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, I assume when a spouse does start pestering the other spouse about "don't eat that" or "do you really need that" or

whatever it is, that at least some of the time they have good intentions. They really are trying to help.

Susan Orenstein: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Does it help or is that -- if I ask you to help me, if I said, "Hey, Honey, tell me to back away from the chips," I think that would be one thing. But if it's her idea and she starts bugging me about the too many Cokes or too much beer or whatever it is, does that have any kind of positive impact or does that just aggravate me and cause unhappiness in our marriage?

Susan Orenstein: I think it would aggravate you and cause unhappiness in the marriage.

Lee Rosen: I agree.

Susan Orenstein: I think so. I think so. I think there's a huge difference between, "Honey, I'm trying to watch it. If you see me eating this much, say something," or forcing your opinion on somebody.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Do you ever find couples where somebody is surprised that the weight is bothering their spouse, that they gained a lot and they don't realize that it's a problem? Or do they usually kind of know?

Susan Orenstein: I think they may know but they may not know the whole picture. So sometimes the weight issue and the food issues have different meanings; they symbolize different things for different people and often I see couples don't really realize that until they have direct conversations about it, how one person's interpreting the weight issue. And so people jump to a lot of conclusions but I don't see couples actually having that many direct conversations and a clear understanding.

And I think that's one of the valuable things about couples work is that you bring all the invisible, the assumptions and expectations, up to the fore. And then once people know what's really going on in reality and not just in your mind, you can really start to make changes and hear each other and understand each other.

Lee Rosen: Well, what advice do you give to people that want to bring this issue out and start talking about it in a positive way? They don't want to just nag or pester their spouse; they want to actually start really working on it. How do you get that conversation started without starting World War III in your house?

Susan Orenstein: Right. So I think it is useful to realize that it could potentially be a nuclear issue. It could be a World War III issue if not handled carefully. So I think couples really -- one partner would need to be really delicate about how they bring it up. So what I suggest as kind of a nice, gentle way to start is to talk about, hey, why don't we start going to the grocery together? What can I make for dinner? How can I be helpful?

Let's talk about having a certain lifestyle. And so it's you and me together in this because really all of us, no matter how thin or heavy you are, there's certain foods that are healthier than others and there's a certain active lifestyle that's healthier than others. It doesn't even matter if there's a weight issue or not.

And so I think if you can talk to your partner and partner up about what do we want our lifestyle to look like? Let's go for a walk. What kind of restaurant are we going to go to? All those choices where you have daily choices about what you're going to eat and how much activity you're going to get.

Lee Rosen: You know -- and I think that sounds like great advice and exactly like where I would imagine you would want to head. But realistically in this society we live in, nothing is working to help people lose weight. I mean, everybody knows they keep changing the rules and dietary this and recommendations for that and everybody's exploding. It's not just -- it's everybody.

Susan Orenstein: That's a very good point.

Lee Rosen: So if you're really -- so is your advice about really getting healthier and losing the weight or is your advice about just finding a way to communicate and you're probably going to still be fat when you're done?

Susan Orenstein: I love how you just dance around these issues, Lee. I really do believe in a healthy lifestyle. And it is a challenge. I think it's a challenge for families. I know in my own family it's a challenge for us to -- how many desserts do we let our kids eat a day and how much TV are we going to let them watch? And it is a challenge and nobody's going to be perfect.

But I do really value eating healthy and exercising. And that doesn't mean people have to be skinny or eat all whole grains all day long, but I do value that and I think both parts are really useful, is having those true conversations with partners and also looking at the lifestyle. And that lifestyle is going to be important for the kids too,

to see how the parents are making choices around food and exercise.

Lee Rosen: I have some friends that I actually know from the pool in our neighborhood and in that family the husband had a heart attack and had -- the husband and the wife both had too many pounds and husband had a heart attack and the wife got very gung-ho about getting healthier, losing weight, that sort of thing.

And she -- I don't know the details of their house, but I think she started cooking healthy. They started walking and running some and all that. She lost a ton of weight. She looks great. I see her at the pool. But husband hasn't changed at all. I don't know what's going on or how -- she obviously is doing some thing he's not doing, or vice versa.

But I think she really launched this campaign for them to work together and to talk about things. And you know, a heart attack really shocks you into action. But isn't it almost -- I wonder if it almost makes it worse that they took this on and she was successful at it and he hasn't been, if that doesn't drive a wedge in there. Is working on this issue dangerous in terms of the relationship for some people?

Susan Orenstein: Wow. I haven't seen that.

Lee Rosen: Well, you're the expert.

Susan Orenstein: I'm the expert.

Lee Rosen: These folks seem happy as clams, I guess. I mean, they don't tell me about their marriage but they're still together.

Susan Orenstein: Right. I think for couples to feel really good they have shared interests, shared goals, shared values, but that doesn't mean every single thing matches up. And they must have plenty of things that do match up to make them feel happily married.

There's some issues that don't ever get resolved and this could be one of them for that couple. I really don't know.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. So if a couple comes to you and it really has -- things have disintegrated -- somebody has gained a lot of weight and the other spouse is not happy, the marriage is not working out -- what are you going to do to fix them up?

Susan Orenstein: Well, I think actually what's really helpful is to talk about pleasure with couples and how they can get pleasure and how can they give pleasure and sensuality with each other, and kind of change the idea that food is bad. So actually, sometimes it could be sharing a really good meal, kind of a healthy meal, so that food wouldn't be off limits. But sharing pleasure, sharing sensuality, listening to music together, going to the beach, doing things that they can really enjoy to find some connections.

And every couple comes in with different issues, very private issues, that would -- so with this particular couple that comes in, I really could have lots of different things going on. But what I would want to do is help them develop some connection, some warmth, some trust to be able to talk about what's really going on and what each person needs.

And what each person needs -- if the heavy person needs help from the other person if they do want to make a lifestyle change and how to make sure that no one's feeling judged or belittled. So I really want them to be able to express what's in their heart, what they need.

I couldn't really make an assumption just knowing that one person weighs something and the other person doesn't. I would really encourage them to have a safe place to share these things.

Lee Rosen: And that could be with you. That's really neat.

How big of an issue is this? How dangerous is this to marriage? You know, we've talked on this show about affairs and we talk about alcohol abuse, all the different things that -- workaholicism -- I mean, things that really make it tough to be married. Is weight gain -- is it up at the top of this list of things that can really cause a marriage to fall apart or is it not as big a deal as some of those other things?

Susan Orenstein: I think it can be linked to a lot of those other things. I think it can be linked to the infidelity. I think it can be linked to the intimacy sexual issues and the alcohol issues; some people get very heavy from drinking a lot. And then sometimes I see couples where both people have gained weight and it really isn't an issue at all. So I wouldn't say just gaining weight would be an issue up there in and of itself as much as infidelity, but I think I usually see it teased in with other things.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's part of a bigger picture it sounds like, a lot of the time.

Well, is there anything else that we need to know about dealing with this partner that's put on too much weight, or if you're the partner that's put on too much weight? Any other advice you'd want to give to folks?

Susan Orenstein: I think what's really important in a couple where people have the intimacy and the closeness is to feel like they can talk about anything and they're on the same side and they love each other and they respect each other and they can broach these sensitive topics.

So the first thing is creating that foundation of love and trust and respect. So I would suggest to couples, if you don't have that foundation it probably isn't safe to go to that possibly explosive issue. So the first thing I'd suggest is really look at how can you have openness, intimacy, trust, and in a safe place to be able to talk about things? And that's what folks learn when they come to couples counseling and when they come to couples workshops is those tools to create that safe place to talk about absolutely anything.

Lee Rosen: Last question I want to ask -- I feel like you're really the expert at helping the spouses deal with one another and making the marriage work and all that. But you are also an expert at most things emotional. So let's say you've tried to lose the weight. You've joined the gym. You've hired the personal trainer. You've done NutriSystem and Weight Watchers and all of those other things and they just haven't worked for you. Will coming to see a psychologist help? Is there stuff you can do that's better than all that other stuff we might have already tried and failed at?

Susan Orenstein: And you're talking about just for the weight issues?

Lee Rosen: Just, yeah, the relationship. Let's say I'm fat and happy and the marriage is working but I just am tired of being overweight. Can a psychologist help us fix that problem?

Susan Orenstein: If there are emotional issues involved, which there usually are, yes, absolutely. Occasionally it's hormonal issues or maybe because of antidepressants or something like that where you really want to check with your physician to see what's going on.

But oftentimes people are not really aware of the triggers to make them overeat and what psychologists really do is look at behavior modification and emotions. And how do people comfort themselves and how do people get their needs met?

And so if you're getting a preponderance of your needs met with overeating, then you're really missing out and you're really not

taking care of yourself in other ways. And so what counseling would do is really look at you as a whole and what parts of your life where you might be starving and you need to feed yourself in other ways: intellectually, spiritually.

So that's what I would do with folks is really help them look at themselves and see what they need.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Well, Susan, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to share your information with people.

Susan Orenstein: Always a pleasure.

Lee Rosen: If you would like to get more information about Dr. Susan Orenstein's practice, she has a website at OrensteinSolutions.com. I want to spell that for you because last names are always tricky. It's O-r-e-n-s-t-e-i-n Solutions dot com. You can also call her office at (919) 654-7311. I'll put the number and a link to the website in the show notes at StayHappilyMarried.com so you can find all the links you need there.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. If you have comments about this show or any of our shows there's a comment section right below the post at StayHappilyMarried.com. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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