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What Happened to Your Sex Drive?

This is Episode number 78 of Stay Happily Married, "What Happened to Your Sex Drive?"

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 am here by telephone with Alisa Bowman. She runs a very popular marriage advice website, ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. If you're like me and -- I listen to a lot of these shows while sitting at the computer -- sometimes I do it on my iPod, but sometimes I'll just be sitting and listening while I'm, theoretically, working. And so if you want to pop her site up in another window, it's ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com, so go ahead and click on that and check it out.

She is a freelance writer. She's been behind many diet and health publications over the past 10 years. She's ghostwritten six *New York Times* best sellers. She's been a senior editor for *Runner's World* Magazine. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and daughter. But for me, anyway, the thing that brought her to my attention was ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. So we'll talk about that some and we'll talk about this whole "What Happened to Your Sex Drive?" question. I'd like to know.

Alisa, welcome to the show. How are you doing?

Alisa Bowman:

I'm doing well. Thanks for having me today.

September 8, 2009 - What Happened to Your Sex Drive?

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really excited. There's nothing about talking about sex to get my attention. That's embarrassing to say but, gosh, those are the things I perk up for.

Let me ask you, though, about your site, Project Happily Ever After. How did that come to be? What caused you to start that?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. I started the site because from my own experience -- after five years of marriage my husband and I had a daughter. And then flash forward about two years after that, we came very close to getting a divorce, which is very common. Not something I realized at the time, but having children -- most people think, okay, we'll have kids and we'll have something in common. But it's one of the fastest ways to ruin a marriage, actually.

And so we were both self-employed too. We both had our own businesses and that was yet another stressor on our marriage. And I sat him down one day and I said, "Look, I'm miserable. I've told you I've been miserable before and nothing's changed. And if something doesn't change in the next four months, this is it."

And so over four months I read every marital improvement book I could get my hands on. And he didn't actually read the books with me but he did do pretty much every exercise and every technique that I read about and suggested we try. So he was very open-minded, which was important.

And some of the stuff we did was extremely silly and did not work, and some of the stuff that we did actually did work. And so four months later we renewed our vows. We were having sex again. When we had started the marriage project we had not had sex in so long that I didn't remember the last time. And I honestly didn't care about having it ever again at that point. But by this time that we renewed our vows I did, and it was a priority for us.

And so that is probably one of the most important things I can say about having a sex life is that you have to make it a priority. But we'll talk about that a little later, I'm sure.

Lee Rosen: So things are back on track. The project worked.

Alisa Bowman: Yes. The project worked. And so that basically led me to start the blog. I am a writer by trade and that's what I do. Most freelance writers have a blog. Most freelance writers write about writing. But that was something that I wasn't interested in doing so I just started blogging about marriage -- my marriage, my sex life -- and it turned into me offering other people who were in similar situations advice.

Lee Rosen: I've got to ask you, how does your husband feel about having his sex life and his marriage discussed on the Internet?

Alisa Bowman: He's amazingly open to it. It's always perplexing to me to try to figure out why he's open to it because most of the men I know tell me that they'd be mortified if their wives were doing what I'm doing.

Lee Rosen: I can imagine.

Alisa Bowman: But he's gone on TV with me. We recently did a segment for Fox News about sex and they had us meet with a sex therapist and this whole bit and he was great with it. And I think part of it is he sort of likes that feeling of fame and feeling important because he doesn't really have that in his life, so it's a way for him to experience that through me.

And the whole thing has brought us closer. He can't deny the fact that me blogging about our marriage has actually improved our marriage. It's improved our sex life. I mean, meeting with the sex therapist spiced up our sex life in so many different ways. So there's been a lot of benefits to him and to the marriage that we probably would not have had had I not been writing about it and thinking about it so much.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I would guess the average guy, if asked if he would talk about sex in order to have more of it, he'd probably say okay.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. Like, that's all I have to do?

Lee Rosen: I'll be on TV. Whatever you need. Right.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. If that's going to get you in the bedroom with your clothes off, sure.

Lee Rosen: Right. We're easy. We're really very simple people.

Alisa Bowman: I know. I know. I tell women all the time most men only have two needs. One is not to be hen-pecked and the other is to have his wife want to have sex with him.

Lee Rosen: Simple, simple people. Well, let me ask you this now, sort of going from one end of the spectrum to the other. When we talk about this whole idea of people not having really much of a sex drive, what are the factors that make a spouse more likely to lose interest? What's going on there?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. One is that the marriage is in trouble. And what happens is that -- especially for women, when they do not feel adored by their husbands, when they feel taken advantage of or overwhelmed or any of these negative feelings that can happen when your marriage is in trouble, they lose their attraction to their husband and they just don't want to have sex with him anymore.

And related to that there's also a power thing involved where it's -- for some women, especially stay-at-home moms, it may be their only source of power in the relationship. If they don't have -- they're not a high-earner; sex is used sort of as a bargaining chip. And that's not to say that that's functional in any way, but that does happen. And then also, when you're fatigued, stressed, overwhelmed, your sex drive just goes down. It's a natural thing for women.

Now, for men it sometimes is the opposite. When they're stressed at the end of a long work day, right before bed they're thinking, "I just want to have sex and go to bed." And a lot of women at the end of their long work day or at the end of a day of taking care of kids, or whatever it is they're doing, all they're thinking is, "I really hope my husband doesn't want to have sex because I just want to go to sleep." So it's two different mindsets.

And then when you've been married for a long time there's also the boredom factor. You're with the same person. You do the same things over and over again in the same place and that can get boring and routine. And the same thing that really turns you on in the beginning, now you're just like, "Eh, I can take it or leave it."

So those are the three most common: it's the fatigue, the boredom, and the bad marriage, the anger that goes along with that.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. Yeah. Very practical -- I mean, just reality of kind of life going on. It makes a lot of sense.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Is there a normal -- is there a frequency of sex habits, that sort of thing? What is normal today? How do we know if we're in trouble?

Alisa Bowman: Well, I would say everything is normal. But what's average is one to three times a week. And I would caution people to not worry about the average, though. Worry about what makes you happy. Worry about what's happy in your marriage.

What's not normal is one person in the marriage feels completely not paid attention to. Usually that's the husband; he feels like his needs are often not being met. He wants to have sex with his wife; she's often rebuffing him, saying no. And what I think a lot of times women don't understand is when you constantly do that to your husband you're sort of telling him, "I don't love you. You're not good enough." Even though you're not saying it in those words, that's what he's getting from you.

And so if one person is feeling, "Okay, our sex life isn't normal," then your sex life isn't normal. It doesn't really matter what society defines as normal; it mostly matters what you and your partner define as normal. And if you feel like you're not connecting, you're not getting that release, then there's a problem and you need to talk about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes sense. If it doesn't feel right, it isn't working. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

One thing that occurs to me as you're talking is this question of is she really just not interested in sex or is it me? Is it the husband? I mean, like you said, we're not feeling it. If we're not having sex, we're worried about things. How do you know if it's really just low desire or if she's not really happy in the relationship and we're in trouble, that she's not attracted anymore, that kind of thing?

Alisa Bowman: Right. Well, I think usually it is a little of both. But worrying about having her be attracted to you, it is so common to lose that spark, the spark that you had when you first met. And I think women lose it a little faster than men and it's probably because we change our focus to other things in life. And to keep that spark it really is a matter of priority and it really is a matter of constantly trying to feel passionate about each other.

And so it doesn't mean that you can't have it again. Like, I hear a lot from couples who say, "Well, I love him; I'm not in love with him anymore." And I always say, "You know what? You can build that back. You can bring that back." Because I did. There was a time when I thought I'm never going to be attracted to my husband again. The best we can have is just a good marriage where we're not fighting with each other anymore and sex is always just going to be this routine thing. And that's not true. It's a matter of solving that problem. So you need to look at ways of spicing it up.

One of the most important things that I would say is sex becomes so routine after so many years. You know the right spots. You kind of know what works and you tend to do the same thing every single

time. And you need to change it up. And so it's okay to sort of go back to sex ed and learn new techniques. There are a lot of educational videos that you can watch online. There's books you can buy. There's all sorts of things you can -- there's these people called sex therapists. There's a whole industry designed to teach people different ways of doing it. And it's actually a little more scientific than anyone would have ever imagined.

My husband and I recently watched some of these educational videos and it just -- I have to say, it really rocked my world. And he'll never admit that there was anything wrong with his technique, but it's completely changed what we're doing in the bedroom. And I highly recommend doing a little research, kind of going back to school, seeing what else you can learn, because it's not so much about attraction a lot of times; it's about boredom. And if you can change the boredom, all of a sudden it gets spicy again.

Lee Rosen: Hard for me to imagine it being boring. I think we have probably very different standards, men and women.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: It's all interesting to me.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. Well, the difference is -- and I talk to my husband about this a lot. Women have different orgasms. Like, they don't all feel the same to us. Sometimes it's like, eh, okay; and sometimes it's amazing. And when I've talked to him he says, "You know what? Every single one is exactly the same. It doesn't matter what we do. It doesn't matter what position we're in. It's exactly the same." And I think that is a fundamental difference between men and women; whereas for women, we really do need change. We really do need new experiences in the bedroom, otherwise it starts to become eh.

And so it's not so much about attraction. That's always the first place that we go and we think, "I've lost the chemistry. The chemistry isn't there anymore." But it's not so much about chemistry as it is about technique and trying to be different and exciting.

Lee Rosen: Well, you mentioned these videos -- educational videos. And I have not ever really spent a lot of time shopping for this stuff, but it would seem like that would -- if you went on the Internet and typed in "sex education videos" I'm guessing you would find a lot of crazy stuff. I mean, how does one even go about finding the reputable, legitimate stuff?

September 8, 2009 - What Happened to Your Sex Drive?

Alisa Bowman: Sure. There's one brand that I've checked out so I can recommend -

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Alisa Bowman: -- called Vivid-Ed. And make sure you go to the educational ones. They also have a pornography arm; the same company makes both types of videos. But the educational ones are very, very good. They actually show you -- real people showing you the techniques with somebody explaining why they work and why you're doing these different things. And you can learn all about from what to do with your hands to oral sex to the G-spot. They all different types of videos.

And if you don't want to actually watch a video, two books that I highly recommend are by the sex therapist Ian Kerner. One's called *She Comes First* and the other one's called *He Comes Next*. And so the man can read *She Comes First*, the woman can read *He Comes Next*, and they're great, great books. I kind of feel like they should be wedding presents for every couple. That's how good they are.

Lee Rosen: Really? That's a great idea, actually. Although no one's really bored with this I guess early on.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. But they'll need it eventually.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. They don't realize. Like, you just put these on the shelf and look at them in a couple of years. You'll need them; trust me. We're all married.

Alisa Bowman: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's terrific. Now, you said -- you mentioned going to the sex therapist. Was that something you had done before the Fox News thing or was that the first time you'd ever talked to one?

Alisa Bowman: That was the first time we'd ever gone to one. I had thought about going to one before. I had worried that -- I didn't think my husband would want to go with me. It was one of those conversations where I didn't even bring it up. It was like, "Oh, he'll never go to a sex therapist with me."

And then Fox contacted us and wanted to see if we would be willing to be the couple who talks about our sex life on TV. And then they wanted us to see a sex therapist as a part of that. So I called my husband, I'm like, "This is a little more involved than I thought. We

have to see a sex therapist. Is that okay?" And he was fine. He was completely fine with it.

So that is another tip that I would give most people is you worry that your spouse is going to turn you down and say, "No, I'm not going to try these things. No way." Well, you can't ever know until you make the ask. And, sure, he could say no; but he might say yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. And you were pleased with it. It sounds like you got some good stuff out of the meetings.

Alisa Bowman: Exactly. Yeah. Wonderful.

Lee Rosen: Very practical advice. And I assume -- at your site, I mean, you're keeping us up to date on everything that's going on. You're writing about all this stuff and people can find out a lot more, I guess, by dropping in and subscribing to the site.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. I write about what I'm learning, but also what I'm learning from other couples, because now a lot of people correspond with me and they tell me what's going on in their marriage and what they've tried and what worked for them or where they're stuck. And so a lot of times someone will e-mail me and ask me a marital question and then I'll blog about it.

Or I'll ask other people I know -- sometimes people ask me questions about things I have not personally been through and so then I'll ask a friend who has been through that. So I'll have someone guest blog on the site about it. For instance, a while ago someone asked about spouses who cheat and what to do. Is there any way to keep the marriage after an affair? And so I had a few different friends -- one who stayed together with a husband, one who got divorced -- and I asked them their advice and then we wrote the blog post based on what they said.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, are you having the experience of people taking your advice and trying to get their sex life back on track -- taking some of your tips and that sort of thing -- and running into trouble? Is your advice usually working? Or are you hearing some stories about people that are not quite making it happen the way they want to?

Alisa Bowman: Well, mostly I hear from people who tell me it's working --

Lee Rosen: Good.

Alisa Bowman: -- which is amazing to me because fixing a marriage is -- there's so many different elements that are involved in it and I don't think it's

as simple as just reading someone's blog. So I'm always happy to hear from the marriages that are improving.

And when I hear from the marriages that aren't, usually what has happened is when the person who tried to change the marriage -- when they started trying, they started trying too late. And a lot of times this happens with men. I don't know why that is, but almost universally it's the husband I hear from who says, "My wife wants to leave me. How do I keep her?"

And when I ask a few questions I'll find out that two years before the wife was like, "I'm miserable. I'm miserable. I'm miserable. We need to do something," and he ignored it. And so then two years went by and she was like, "That's it. I'm done," and she asked for the divorce. And all of a sudden he's panicked. He still loves her and he wants her back. And I say, "Well, here's some things you can try but she's already shut herself off to you. She's completely shut down and she's not trying. There's not a lot you can do in that situation."

And so I do hear from people like that, where really it doesn't matter if it's my advice or someone else's advice; if one spouse isn't going to try and has completely put both feet out the door and is not looking back, there's not a lot you can do.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. They needed to come to you two years earlier.

Alisa Bowman: Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, I think that's true, though. People don't feel motivated to take action until it's a disaster, unfortunately. It's really tough. I see that a lot on our site, that people just don't come -- they're not listening to the shows, they're not tuning into the issue until they're really in serious trouble.

You've been through it, so you have put together a game plan that worked for your marriage and you pulled out of this troubled spot and got things back on track. What should a game plan look like for a couple that -- they are coming to you two years -- at the first sign of trouble they're reading your stuff and they're trying to take action. What should their plan look like?

Alisa Bowman: Well, I can tell you what I did because I don't think it has to be the same plan for every couple. But you look at your marriage and you say, "What is wrong with our marriage? What do I want to improve?" And for me it was almost everything. We weren't having sex so we had to improve our sex life. We weren't communicating so we had to work on that. I didn't feel like we had any romance in our

marriage; that was another thing that we worked on. And intimacy, I didn't feel emotionally close to my husband so we worked on that as well. And forgiveness; I was so angry at him for so many things and so when we fought I'd bring them all up.

And so we worked on those five elements one at a time over a period of four months. And some of them were solved rather easily and I'll go into communication. Communication, it's a skill. And it's not a skill anybody learns. They don't teach it in school. But once you learn how to communicate with your spouse, you will learn how to communicate with every single person in your life.

And it's quite amazing because somebody can come to you very angry, heated up, yelling at you, and you can sit there and you can listen and you can say, "Uh-huh." And then you can say, "I'm sorry you're so angry." And then by the time they pipe down a little bit you can say, "What can I do?" And you can move on. And you'll learn how to do that by learning how to communicate with your spouse.

It's not about winning. That is probably the most important thing that you can learn about communication. It's not about winning the argument because if one person wins, that means the other one lost. It's about understanding each other. And so if you can get past winning and just trying to understand why your spouse is angry, trying to understand what your spouse wants, and then it's about asking for what you need. Okay. My spouse wants this. Am I going to do it? It's about problem solving. So those are all just skills; and the more you work on them, the better you get.

And I would say if you fix communication most of the other aspects of your marriage will fall into place because then everything else becomes a matter of communicating. Like, if one person feels like the sex life is boring, they can say, "You know what? I'm not feeling satisfied in the bedroom. Let's talk about this."

I can give you an example of something my husband and I have not talked about yet but we will.

Lee Rosen: He might want to tune in to hear what's coming.

Alisa Bowman: He a while ago said, as part of the Fox thing, he wanted to have sex every other day. That was his goal. And I was like, wow, that's a lot. I don't know. That's like tripling our frequency. And then I looked at him and I said, "Well, you know I love you. Okay. I'm going to try to make this happen." And so we made some changes and for a couple weeks we were making it happen.

And then it started to happen that he would go out at night and come home late and it ended up that we were only having sex on the nights that it was my night to go out, which meant that I had to come in early in order to fit in the sex. And after a few weeks of this I was like, "Wait a minute. Why am I the one who's making this a priority? If he's the one who wants to have sex every other day, he should be making it a priority."

So we haven't talked about this yet, but this is one of those issues where it could easily turn into me yelling at him and feeling put aside or whatever, but I know it's going to be as simple as, "This is how I'm feeling. What do you think?" And he'll be like, "Yeah. I see what you're talking about. Okay. What are we going to do?"

And so it's just a matter of talking about things and learning how to do it and not getting all of those emotions worked up. You can actually get there.

Lee Rosen: Right. So, yeah, your game plan is basically starting off with communication. And you're saying you've got to learn those skills; you can't just wing it. You've got to figure out how to --

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. And there's plenty of books that'll teach you how to listen. There's a speaker-listener technique which is a very -- somewhat famous technique, but it's very simple. It's you listen while the other person's talking and you're not sitting there -- when you're listening you're not sitting there going, "Okay. I'm going to say this. I'm going to say this. I'm going to say this." No, you're actually listening. And the way that you prove it is when they're done talking you tell them what they just said. And if you can't tell them what they just said, you weren't listening.

Lee Rosen: You weren't listening. Right. Exactly. Now, in your house, in your marriage, when all of this -- when things were coming off the rails, your husband was game for working on it.

Alisa Bowman: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: And so you've got this plan. These are the things we're going to do and this is how we're going to work on this and he's on board. Are you hearing from folks that sometimes the other spouse just won't engage? And then are you doomed if that's the case?

Alisa Bowman: Yeah. It takes two people. You really need both people trying. What I hear is -- I told you about the man who the wife is already checked

out and she doesn't want to try. And I don't know if there's much you can do in that situation.

And then the flip-side to that is I hear from a lot of women who say, "Yeah, I sat my husband down. He said he was going to do this and he was good for a few weeks. And then he slid back into his old self." And to that I say it's constant work. You can't fix your marriage in one night.

And a lot of these things that bother us when we're living together with somebody, they're just habits. And so I'm going to take a stereotypical one, but let's say he leaves the toilet seat up. It's something he's done his entire life. And so if you talk to him about it one night and you say, "You know, in the middle of the night when I wake up to go to the bathroom I don't know it's up. I don't turn the light on. I fall into the toilet. I get pee on my bottom," blah-blah-blah-blah. He says, "That's terrible. I feel for you. Okay. I'll put it down." And then two weeks later it's up again. Well, it's not up because he's trying to annoy you; it's up because he forgot.

And so if you can remind yourself that, you know what? These habits take a long time to form. It's just like any other habit in life: healthy eating, exercise. A lot of times we regress before we actually get on the wagon. That can help because it does; it's like a two steps forward, one step back process, improving your marriage, because you are going through a huge process of change. And then there's also some acceptance that has to take place.

Lee Rosen: Right. Perfect. Well, I could ask you questions all day. And you really -- your advice is just terrific and I think you're helping a lot of people. What I would do if I wanted to hear more from you I think is hook up with your blog. And I really encourage people to do that at ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. And you're updating it just constantly with these stories and stuff and it just -- it's fantastic. So I would encourage everybody to log in and sign up and subscribe in their feed reader and keep up with what you're doing. I'm very grateful that you're doing it. I think it's terrific stuff. Thank you for that.

Alisa Bowman: Thank you very much.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am so glad that you could join us today. And I would love to have you back again some time, but that is about all the time that we have for today. I've already mentioned the site and I can't say enough good things about it, ProjectHappilyEverAfter.com. I'll put a link to it in the show notes.

September 8, 2009 - What Happened to Your Sex Drive?

And thank you for listening today. I'm really glad that you joined us this week. I think you have probably walked away with some great advice and some great leads for more information so I hope that that helps you.

If you have comments about this show or any of our shows, give us a call at the comment line at (919) 256-3083. You can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or you can post a comment right at the site at 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.