



Is Marriage Counseling a Waste of Your Time?

This is episode 94 of Stay Happily Married, "Is Marriage Counseling a Waste of Your Time?"

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host. Welcome to the show. I'm here by telephone with John Wilder. John is a marriage coach from New Castle, Indiana. He's got 30 years of experience with pastoral counseling; now he has a coaching practice. He's got a new book in the works, *You Can Achieve Happily Ever After and Improve Your Love Life Too*. That's coming out soon. And I'm really glad he could join us.

Now, let me tell you, this guy is not afraid of controversy. He's got opinions on marriage counseling and whether it works or doesn't. He argues that it doesn't and he's got an alternative that he thinks will work for you. He takes on the insurance companies and no love is lost between him and the insurance companies that are paying for the marriage counseling.

Let's jump into this and hear what he's got to say. Welcome to the show, John. I'm glad you could join us today.

John Wilder:

Thanks for having me on.

Lee Rosen:

Listen, you have some thoughts -- I know from having talked to you already -- about marriage counseling and whether the whole model works. And I've read a fair amount about that and I know that there are some serious questions there. What are your thoughts on that?

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John Wilder: Well, there's a quiet revolution going on in the marriage counseling industry because it's a little-known secret -- it's a dirty little secret in the industry -- that traditional marriage counseling has a 75 percent failure rate. Would you want to go to a cardiologist with heart problems who three out of four of his patients die?

Lee Rosen: No. I mean, 75 percent is crazy. Now, is that a scientific -- I mean, how do they get that kind of number?

John Wilder: Well, it's done through multiple studies and marriage counselors will admit to these facts. It has a high burnout rate because traditional marriage counselors don't like to fail, and dealing with couples fighting against each other, it's a highly stressful career. And an awful lot of marriage counselors don't even have specific training for marriage counseling. They get licensed but they don't have specific training. And so it's just -- it's a lose-lose proposition.

Lee Rosen: So you feel like most people go in the door, hook up with a marriage counselor, spend a lot of time and money, and the marriage ends of failing?

John Wilder: Yep.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

John Wilder: Basically because, number one, the insurance industry only allows -- or only reimburses for one hour once a week. If your marriage is in crisis, you need much more than that. It's sort of like if you have a life-threatening cut and you go into a surgeon, the surgeon says, "Look, they only pay me to put in one stitch at a time. So I'll put in a stitch today; you come back next week and I'll put another stitch in you. And in 24-28 weeks we should have you stitched up." It's ridiculous.

And let's say your house is on fire. Your marriage is in crisis; let's use the model that your house is on fire. You call the fire department out and they say, "Listen, we're going to put a little bit of that fire out today. We'll come back next week; we'll put a little bit more of that fire out. And 24-28 weeks, we ought to have the fire put out." And in four hours the house is going to burn down. You need a lot of counseling in a very short period of time and the insurance companies won't reimburse for it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That has never made any sense to me. I mean, you go in there for an hour -- which really isn't an hour -- and then you're left for six days and 23 hours until you come back again. You're left

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to your own devices. You weren't doing the right stuff before. You're likely to do a lot of damage in that week in between. So, okay.

John Wilder: You are so right. The marriage counseling actually does more harm than it does good because typically people will get into a situation where they live and let live. It may be quiet rage, but at least they're not actively fighting. But when you go into marriage counseling, you stir it all up, stir the hornets' nest up, and you don't give them any way to deal with it. Well, then they go home and fight for the week and everything is stirred up again.

Lee Rosen: Now, you've been in this business for 30 years. How do your old friends in the counseling profession feel about you saying these things?

John Wilder: Well, the counselors that I talk to actually agree. They kind of feel like their hands are tied because they're dependant upon the insurance companies for reimbursement. And the downside is to get coaching, the insurance companies won't reimburse for it and so you have to pay out-of-pocket. And so you have to have a couple that is committed to making their marriage work to pay out-of-pocket. But I tell clients, listen, it's a whole lot cheaper than divorce. It's a heck of a lot better for the kids.

And really, most couples really want to stay together; they just haven't figured out how to do it. And they think, "Well, if I get divorced at least the pain'll stop." And I tell them, "That doesn't solve the pain. It doesn't fix the pain. It only makes the pain worse."

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you have an alternative that you're doing now. You've kind of evolved from this counseling model into something new. What are you doing that you think works?

John Wilder: Well, basically I do a four-hour intake, because you have to get the history of the family, both sides; you have to find out what the problems are and get a treatment plan on how to resolve the problems; and then the number one thing that I teach couples is how to resolve conflicts amicably.

You see, we're all geared naturally to fighting. We're biologically hardwired to fight. But nobody is geared to resolve conflicts amicably or peacefully with allowing respect for the other party. And so the old adage of, "You give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

And that's the other problem in traditional marriage counseling: They don't teach conflict resolution skills. So they're basically

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putting a band-aid on the problem but they're not teaching couples how to resolve their own problems, because you're never going to agree on anything. Well, when you have disagreements then couples typically will fight and they will fight to the point of dysfunction because -- and to fight there has to be a winner and a loser. Well, nobody wants to be a loser so people will fight vehemently to avoid being a loser. Instead of attacking the problem, they attack each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. So what kind of results are you seeing coming out of your approach?

John Wilder: Well, the coaching model is showing a 75 percent success rate, as opposed to a 75 percent failure rate. Now, you can't fix everybody because you have some intrinsically poisonous people that basically aren't fixable. For example, a sociopathic personality is not traditionally fixable; there is no therapy to treat that. And you have profound drug and alcohol abuse that the person is not motivated to change; well you can't fix that.

You have to have two people willing to work on the problem. And sadly, there are dysfunctional people that don't want to own up to the problem, don't want to admit to the problem, and sure don't want to work on it.

So you have a failure rate but it's a much higher success rate than traditional marriage counseling.

Lee Rosen: So let's say that a couple shows up in a counselor's office or in a coach's office and they talk about, "Gosh, he never listens to me. He doesn't know what's important to me." What's the coach going to say versus what is the counselor going to say? How is the approach going to feel different to the couple as they're sitting there?

John Wilder: Well, the traditional marriage counselor will talk about feelings, "Tell me how you feel about that. And John, tell me how you feel about that." Well, feelings aren't really good at resolving problems. It's kind of like mental masturbation; you're doing it by yourself but you're not doing it with a partner.

I say, "This is a problem. You feel like John doesn't listen to your feelings. How do you suggest that we resolve this? I have some ideas but let's talk about how to resolve that problem." And make the problem the issue rather than attacking John and having Mary tell me, "Well, John's a no-good S.O.B. and he's self-centered." I take the personal attacks out of it and I suggest to the couple that --

Remember the old playground thing that the kid misses the ball and he says, "I want a do-over, I want a do-over"? And typically that's an immature approach but I suggest to the couple, "Listen, you guys need a do-over. You both have screwed up. You both have contributed to the problem. I'm suggesting that you have a do-over. Let's forgive each other and start over and learn some skills to make your marriage work. How would that be? Do you feel like that would work?" And I get a commitment from them that they're going to both mutually work on the problem instead of attacking each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. So if I'm in your hometown in New Castle, Indiana, I know where I can go to get this coaching model rather than the counseling model, because I can call you. But if I'm anywhere else in the world, how do I know when I'm flipping through Google or whatever, searching for somebody, how do I know if they're doing more of a counseling thing or a coaching thing?

John Wilder: Well, the answer to that is simply to plug into your search engine "marriage coaching." What I'm suggesting to your audience is that they avoid traditional marriage counseling altogether, even though you have to pay for it out of your own pocket. And typically coaching is short-term. It's done in two or three, four sessions, but several hour sessions. And when you get people geared in the right direction, you achieve a lot of success quickly.

But the answer is to search out marriage coaching. And it doesn't have to be somebody in your hometown because most marriage coaches will deal with you over the phone instead of requiring you to come into an office. I like to get my clients on Yahoo! IM and get the camera up so we can see each other. That's not a requirement but it's helpful.

Lee Rosen: Right.

John Wilder: You get non-verbal communication. You see the non-verbal communication. So it's helpful from a coaching point of view.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, the counselors that have dominated this industry, really, they would say -- I suspect they would say, "Look, we've been doing this for a long time. We have licenses. We have credentials. That's why the insurance companies will pay for our help, because we are certified and recognized as experts." And they might say, "Well, these coaches don't necessarily have those same credentials, and therefore they shouldn't be trusted," or something. How do you respond to that?

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John Wilder: Well, the very simple answer is that, yeah, they're licensed, but that doesn't mean they're qualified. I went to grad school and I dropped out because I didn't believe in what they were doing and how they were doing it. It's sort of like a good midwife can do as good a job as a doctor. Doctors have failure rates. Psychiatrists have failure rates, psychologists have failure rates basically because they bought into the treatment model. And it simply is showing that it doesn't work.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. So what you're saying is, hey, look, the recognized experts are delivering a service that doesn't work. You may not know as much about us but maybe it'll work, so give it a try.

John Wilder: Well, it's like the cardiologist. He's a licensed cardiologist but he's got a 75 percent death rate. Do you want to go to this guy?

Lee Rosen: Right. So are there any -- we talked about -- you said the psychologists and those types will acknowledge that these studies show their failure rate. Are there the same kind of scientific controlled studies of the coaching model yet or is that something that's too new?

John Wilder: It's fairly new. It's basically reporting -- statistical reporting. Let me also say that marriage coaches typically come out of helping professions. You don't just typically hang out a shingle and decide you're going to be a marriage coach and not have qualifications and education in the industry. It's people who are thinking, rational individuals that have decided that traditional counseling doesn't work and they can provide a better alternative method. They typically have education in the field and have worked in the field and are moving away. So it's not a field for charlatans to con people.

And the other thing is that you figure out pretty quick if it's going to work or not. And I have far more horror stories -- I have researched, taken numerous studies through Haro [ph] and other reporter connections, pitch rate [ph], and said, "Tell me your stories -- your horror stories -- about marriage counseling -- traditional marriage counseling." And people coming out of the wall to say how abysmal it is.

The other problem is that marriage counselors will typically take a side and say, "Yeah. You should get divorced." They just do more harm than they do good.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, and so it sounds like if you're going to go to a coach you want to dig in a little more. They're not licensed and there is nobody screening them, so you've got to sort of figure out what their

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background is and what their experience is before you pick them. I mean, that makes a lot of sense and sounds like good advice.

Now, you said you'd know fairly early on whether it was working. So let's say I've been to one of these four-hour long intakes and a couple of -- two-hour-plus sessions with a coach. What are my indicators that it's working or that I'm really on the wrong path with this person?

John Wilder: Well, most marriage coaches will have a session -- a complimentary session -- a get-to-know-you, feel-out session where you can ask the coach direct questions, that's free; it's complimentary. For example, a lot of lawyers taking on cases on contingency will meet with you for free and let you get a feel for them, take your temperature. And if it doesn't feel right, you go on to the next one.

But what I'm finding is marriage coaches tend to be more dedicated, tend to be more intelligent, and tend to have become more evolved and -- one of the examples that I can tell you is when I was going to school in graduate school for clinical psychology, the only school of psychology that was effectively testable was a school in behaviorism. And every psychologist would disallow behaviorism but there's a lot of different schools of psychology, a lot of different opinions. None of them have been clinically testable except for behaviorism. Well, they all disavowed behaviorism.

But again, you can call and talk to them for free, get a feel, and what they will typically tell you tends to make sense. Just as I was suggesting the one hour once a week is not going to work and we're going to do it differently, that tends to resonate with people.

Lee Rosen: Why do you think it is -- why would an insurance company keep paying for something that isn't working? I mean, aren't they in the business -- normally they won't do an experimental -- they won't pay for experimental medication or experimental treatment. Why the heck are they willing to pay for marriage counseling if there's a 75 percent failure rate?

John Wilder: You hit the nail on the head. There are bean counters called actuaries in the insurance business and it's their job to figure out how to limit payments. Well, by doling out the marriage counseling to one hour once a week, they have figured out that couples will become disgusted and fall by the wayside; they won't continue to go to marriage counseling because it's not working for them and they'll go ahead and get divorced. And so they don't have to pay a whole lot before the couple falls out of the traditional marriage counseling.

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Typically it'll be four or five sessions and people will get disgusted, through their hands up and quit.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, listen --

John Wilder: Here's the thing. If they truly were motivated towards the patients' rights and what's best for the patient, they would allow the traditional marriage counselor to treat the patient with multi-hour sessions and that would work. But they're not geared for what's best for the patient; they're geared for what's best for the bottom line.

Lee Rosen: Right. I hear you.

John Wilder: So if you want to have a cap on the total number of hours that the insurance company's going to pay for, I say fine, but allow the therapist to design a treatment plan and administer those hours however he sees fit.

You need to have a four-hour intake session. And when you do that, couples go away feeling happier, healthier, they have a sense of hope and a sense of motivation. They need to be heard. They need to feel like the coaching is helping them and is going to help them. Well, you get that result when you have a four-hour intake session. But traditional marriage counseling, the insurance company won't pay for it. And so they only pay for three, four, five sessions and they figure, hey, that's pretty cheap.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, you are not afraid of controversy, my friend. Between the counseling profession and the insurance companies, they're all going to be gunning for you.

Tell me about the book. The book is in the works, headed toward publication, *You Can Achieve Happily Ever After and Improve Your Love Life Too*. What's the idea behind the book?

John Wilder: Well, every little girl dreams of happily ever after. The problem is, there's no school to teach her how to get it. And guys have a sense of romance as well; they want to have a happy marriage, a secure marriage, an emotionally fulfilling marriage as well. So basically, my book is a school to self-teach how to achieve happily ever after.

And then I deal quite a bit with their sex lives as well. Sex is an area of specialization that I've had since I was 16 years old when I did a book report in anatomy and physiology class on Masters' and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response*, which was a book that came out in the '60s which was a highly controversial book at the time. So

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I've dealt quite a bit with people's sex lives and teaching them how to have a truly ecstatic sex life.

Well, I also had a second major in Bible and I dealt with that in the churches as well and people -- they get all shocked, "You can't talk about sex in churches." Well, God invented sex. There's a whole lot of -- people view the Bible as a bunch of "thou shalt nots." It's an ancient history book full of "thou shalt nots." Well, there are all kinds of positive commands commanding us to have a truly outstanding sex life, but you won't hear that preached in the pulpit or taught in the Sunday school class.

Well, I deal with the scriptures that deal with our sex lives and then I go into quite a bit of detail on sexual techniques for men and sexual techniques for women. Most people get tired of the same thing day after day. It's like feeding somebody macaroni and cheese three times a day or three times a week; pretty soon people don't want it anymore.

Lee Rosen: No more macaroni and cheese. Exactly. Yeah.

John Wilder: Well, and the studies have shown that women, they have their husbands on a starvation diet of sex once a week or less. Sixty percent of the marriages are having sex once a week or less. Well, it's no wonder that men cheat.

And the other thing is that if you're having an active sex life -- it goes back to the body. Studies have shown that if you have sex twice a week or more often, it cuts your heart attack risk by 50 percent.

Lee Rosen: Well, there's an argument I hadn't thought of before.

John Wilder: That it's equivalent to a half-hour workout in a gym. It helps prevent diabetes. It helps prevent being overweight. It helps prevent weight gain.

Lee Rosen: You may want to put all that in chapter one. That could ensure your book being on the best seller list.

John, that's about all the time we have today but I really appreciate you coming on today. And I love your fearless approach to everything and your willingness to take on convention wisdom. Thank you so much for being with us.

John Wilder: I appreciate it. Have me back on any time.

Lee Rosen: Any time. Well, next --

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John Wilder: I'm sure you will generate some more questions when the show airs.

Lee Rosen: Well, a big thank you to John Wilder for joining us today. And thank you so much for listening. I hope that you've gotten something out of this discussion and I hope you will join us again next week.

In the meantime, we'd love to hear your comments. Please give our listener comment line a call at (919) 256-3083. Or you can send us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

Until next time, stay happily married.

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