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Staying Married for the Kids

This is Stay Happily Married #97, "Staying Married for the Kids."

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Lee Rosen: Seventy percent of Americans in a recent poll say that a marriage that has a lot of fighting and where there are kids really ought to end in divorce, that you ought to just go ahead and wrap it up. You shouldn't stay together for the kids and divorce is the preferred option to kids living in a family where all they see is lots and lots of fighting.

I wonder what we can learn about that and whether that really is a good idea; whether you ought to leave for the kids or whether you ought to stay. And so I have here on the telephone with me Dr. Tina Lepage. Tina, how are you doing?

Tina Lepage: I'm doing great. How are you, Lee?

Lee Rosen: I'm great. Welcome to the show. Tina, you've been on the show, gosh, many times before. You have a doctorate in clinical psychology and I know that you've been practicing a long time. You see husbands, wives, men, women, children, families, and you really are an expert on the answer to this question of should people stay together for the kids.

I'm wondering right off the bat, do you have sort of an opinion about that?

Tina Lepage: Well, I don't have an opinion about it one way or the other because each situation is different. And so I do think that we see in society,

even, that the pendulum has sort of swung back and forth from couples thinking that you should always stay together for the children to now you're talking about the new statistic that people think that people should -- if they're unhappy that they should divorce.

And I want to point out, of course it's always interesting when these surveys are taken because the question they're asking in the survey is if there's a lot of fighting in the marriage. And so that's one of the things we'll talk about today and that's one of the things that also makes a difference, because there's a difference between a highly volatile marriage with a lot of fighting and one where the parents are unhappy but the children aren't living in a lot of distress and fighting.

Lee Rosen: Right. I can see where you could have one without the other. Well, what kind of people -- what kind of couples -- decide to stay together for the kids?

Tina Lepage: You know, I think there are all different kinds of couples. Over the years I've heard couples say things like they went back and forth -- "We have to get divorced; we can't tolerate this" -- and then they go stand at the door of their children who are sleeping and say, "Okay. We have to go back to the table. We have to figure something out."

So I think people who stay together for the children are just people who are trying to figure out what's really best for their children. And I think anybody who has kids, when they're looking at divorce they really go back and forth with this. I think most people at least ask themselves the question, "Should we stay together for the kids? Is that going to be better than putting them through a divorce?"

Lee Rosen: Well, it kind of seems to me -- and I'm just kind of watching from the outside, but if you've got issues that are big enough that you feel like you need to get divorced, how can they be not so big that you're able to stay together for the kids?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. That's a good question. I think the reality is kind of complex. I think that -- for example, research have shown that children are not all that in touch with their parents' intrinsic happiness and fulfillment, let's say. So while of course they pay attention to high conflict and fighting, etc., if you were just unhappy but the kids don't really know about that because you keep your adult discussions between yourselves, etc., then the children often times will still do better staying within a marriage than they will having the parents separate.

I think people sometimes too look at the whole perspective of what's the experience of divorce going to be like for the children? For children divorce is usually going to cause, especially in the early stages, upheaval in their day-to-day lives, upheaval in their emotional lives. They have to go through sort of mourning the end of their family. And so while the parent might be feeling relief early on, the child usually doesn't feel relief unless there's been a lot of fighting in the home.

So I think parents are sort of thinking about some of this too, like what's the experience going to be like for the children? Everybody's lives get disrupted by them living in two households, shared parenting arrangements; how's that all going to work out? Is the child going to have enough time with both people?

And parents who are divorced will say -- I think even the ones who say that it was the right decision and it's going well will say but it is different. You're not saying good night to your kid every night. You're not having the normal day-to-day bump-ins that happen when you live in the same house. So I think those are some of the things that people are kind of looking at and considering.

So while, like you're pointing out, they may have a lot of problems of their own to try to work out and get through, I think sometimes they're still not willing to change the day-to-day life and the family structure for the child.

Lee Rosen: Well, you explain all of that in the well-reasoned and rational tone of a scientist. And it all sounds good. But day-to-day you're living in this house in a marriage that is so flawed that you really don't want to be there anymore. And I'm just kind of wondering how all that research translates into day-to-day life.

Tina Lepage: Right.

Lee Rosen: What is it like for families when this is kind of looming all the time?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Well, you know, in the ideal situation, and what we would hope for, is that when people decide to stay together for the children, that that's their motivation but that's not the end of it. Meaning that they are not saying, I'm going to stay together for the kids but this is then going to stay miserable forever.

So ideally what you have is people that stay together for the kids but then that motivation transitions into helping the marriage become happy, healthy, fulfilling again. Because if you go ahead and decide

to stay married for the kids -- if you're going to stay married, you may as well try to be happily married for your own benefit.

And so I think the early stages can be very difficult and there can even be some hopelessness and thinking that it's not going to get better. But hopefully the people who stay married then either get into some therapy, start to look at things differently, try to work on their relationship in a different way than they had before since they decided they're going to stay married for the kids.

Lee Rosen: So do they have to -- let's say your kids are 13, 14 years old. Are they looking at it as, "We're just going to hold on for the next four or five years and get these kids off to college"? Or are you really advocating for, look, if you're going to spend the next four or five years holding on, why not fix it?

Tina Lepage: Well, I think that you can go both ways. But one thing I would say is if you're going to hold on for the next four or five years -- or, frankly -- and that's one scenario. There are people who do this when they're looking at their 5-year-old and decide they're going to stay together. So it can be a lot of years or it can be a few years.

But regardless, what I would say is don't let this be a decision of, "Okay. So now I'm going to have X number of years in misery." So whether you're going to work on your marriage so that you can maybe, hopefully, become happily married again; or whether you're just going to work on yourself in terms of, "How can I still be happy, fulfilled human being if I'm in a marriage that isn't what I would have expected it to be or what I would have wanted it to be?" So trying to see if you can at least find a place so that your day-to-day life is not just counting down the years.

Lee Rosen: So for couples that are doing this, that make the decision, "Okay. We're going to figure out a way to work this out and at least -- and stay together for these kids," are you seeing -- are they communicating? Are they still involved with one another sexually? Are they cooperating on getting household stuff done? Or how is it playing out?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. You know, it's really different marriage by marriage. Staying married for the kids can take a lot of forms. So some people stay intimate partners and work on the relationship. There's actually a book that's called *Imperfect Harmony*, which is about staying married for the kids. And I like the title because I think really any marriage is an imperfect harmony. But the book is great because it talks about how to recreate a happy marriage after you decide to stay married for the kids. So I think that's one scenario.

Other people really live more as roommates. And this is sort of the amicable type of couple who's decided, "Okay. We're both not happy here. We should keep this structure for the children." And so they may still even have very much a working friendship even though the romantic intimacy might be gone. And those people tend to cooperate fairly well.

Some people really totally disengage emotionally, even as friends, and they function almost as business partners in raising the kids.

And then some people, I would say a much smaller degree, agree to an open marriage where they can both get their sexual needs met outside of the marriage.

Lee Rosen: Now, are people evolving into those arrangements or are they sitting down in advance and working out the ground rules for how that's going to happen? Or how does that come to be the case?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Again, I hate to say over and over it varies. But I think it's just different. You've got the couples that will sit down and talk about it. You've got some couples where, frankly, one of them has probably -- in their mind is staying only for the kids and the other partner might not even know how miserable that one partner is. So that really just depends on how much the couple has been communicating about their relationship, I think.

And certainly I think a lot of people, though, who have the divorce discussion then have this "should we stay married for the kids" discussion. And if they go that route, I think often times they do sit down, talk about whether there should be any ground rules. Sometimes early on they'll just establish ground rules about having some time alone and space within the home that's they're own and just putting some sort of boundaries in place. Not talking badly about one another to the children. People might talk about what ground rules they're going to have around maintaining public appearance, all of those types of things.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Tina Lepage: And I would really suggest that if you're at this point that both people agree to go to therapy, again, either to learn how to improve the marriage or how to achieve personal happiness within a non-intimate marriage, because if you've gotten to this point in your life, I just think having a professional involved can be really helpful.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It sounds like obviously if you worked well together in the first place then things might not have gotten to this point where you were discussing whether you were going to be together for the kids.

Tina Lepage: Well, sometimes -- you've always still got the couples that just feel like they fall out of love. And they're not the high-conflict couples. There are certainly the ones, like you're talking about, where things are just not working well, things are horrible, etc. But then you've got the people that kind of look at each other and say, you know -- they both agree they've fallen out of love. It's not what it used to be. But again, when they've got kids this whole discussion comes up.

Lee Rosen: Right. It strikes me that -- so it sounds like there are sort of two paths that you're going to follow, that you might be one of these folks that says, "Okay. We're going to work on it. We have these kids and we're now re-energized to fix things and make this marriage work and be back on track as a sort of typical idea of what marriage means." And then you have these other folks who are -- they're re-inventing what their relationship is going to be. And it's not going to be a marriage in the traditional sense; it's going to be one of those variations.

Tina Lepage: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: And do you have a feel for -- of people that -- I mean, I know there's no science on this, but of people that kind of get into this "we need to think about whether we should do this for the kids or not," do you have a feel for how often they go in one direction or the other?

Tina Lepage: No, I don't think I have like a sense of how often they go in one direction. I mean, I will say in our society -- even though the survey said 70 percent think if you're fighting you should end the marriage -- I think there's a lot of staying together for the kids. And I think some couples who end up divorced have still stayed together for years before that for the kids and then it just got to a point of being intolerable. So people certainly do it.

One interesting piece of research has shown that couples who report being unhappy but decide to stay together, when they're interviewed five years later more often than not they report that things are better. So that maybe kind of speaks to while you're in the midst of the worst of it you can start to feel really hopeless, but that staying and working on it for a sustained period of time can improve things. It's hard to feel that way when you're in the midst of it. So that's just sort of an interesting statistic.

Lee Rosen: Right. No, that makes a lot of sense, that if you can just get through it, if you can hang on for a while and if the kids are the motivating force, then there may be light at the end of that tunnel.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. And I think if people are considering staying for the kids it's really a time to ask themselves a lot of pointed questions about yourself and try to figure out how you can be happy. And I always say you have to ask yourself about yourself, because we all can talk about how our spouse could be different to make us happy, but really you're the only person in control of yourself and your own happiness.

So I think it's a good time to start thinking about what are your expectations? What do you expect from marriage? Is it realistic? Have your expectations changed? Can you alter your expectations so that you feel differently about your spouse and your marriage? Or an exercise I do with couples at this point is to have them think and talk about what they like about one another because when things are bad, it's really easy to focus more on the negative than on the positive.

So there are things that couples can do. Again, obviously, my bias is toward if you're going to stay together you may as well try and be happy and give it a try and try and work on it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. So let's say -- I'm sort of in my mind thinking of these as the "working on the marriage" option or the "some variation on a roommate" option.

Tina Lepage: Mm-hmm.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So for the roommate option, let's say that's the direction you decide you're going to head in.

Tina Lepage: Sure.

Lee Rosen: What do you think about that for the kids? Does that really -- is that a good thing?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. It's sort of the question of what is the impact on the child and can they tell that you're not close emotionally to one another, or section it, or etc.? So whether to not it's good for the kids, again, there's sort of a two-sided coin. One thing -- I mean, kids are kind of funny. It's not always easy to tell what they pick up on or what they tune in to.

So on one hand I think kids often know everything that's going on in a family. There are no sort of real family secrets that they don't know about often times. They see and hear a lot more than we give them credit for as adults.

But on the other hand, they might not read that much into it, if they even contemplate it at all. I mean, kids don't think that much about their parents' relationship if you're not having over-conflict. And so if you're handling it fairly well, children might not notice it. There are people who are happily married who are not particularly affectionate in front of their children or don't engage in public displays of affection and the kids really don't know what's going on in a parent's marriage a lot of times.

I think that there can be probably some potential positive or negative impact on the kid. I think the positive impacts are things like they still have their sense of safety and security intact. They have an intact family. They have daily access to both of their parents as they're growing up. Usually the financial security stays more intact. Overall they're life day to day is just less disrupted both in a practical sense and in an emotional sense.

And there has been -- the largest longitudinal study of children of divorce that ever was done followed kids for 25 years, so well into their adulthood, and found that one of the impacts of divorce that was still showing up in adulthood was that the now-grown kids of divorce experienced a lot more anxiety around their own intimate relationships. So part of the positive impact would be very long-term, as they don't then experience that anxiety in their own adulthood.

If we look at some of the potential negative impact, if it's handled poorly the child could be witnessing regular fighting, which would be very bad for the child. We know that's one of the worst things for children is to have to live in a high-conflict situation.

If the parents are unable to find their own happiness in this setup then the child could have a depressed or anxious parent who's raising them and that has some negative impact. And certainly if the parent ever told the child that they stayed married for the kids, that could really cause a lot of guilt and anger. So would just -- that is an obvious; that's one of the things that would be too much information for the children to know.

Lee Rosen:

Got you. Well, you can't ever assume anything's too obvious. Well, I mean, it's hard to think through all this stuff. You guys think about

it all day long. We're just kind of struggling to get through the next day so it's tough.

But a question I had for you -- and I know I'm focused a little bit on the sort of roommate approach because I feel like the "working it out" approach is what you and I talk about on these shows all the time. I mean, we've got a lot of thoughts on how to work it out and what works and what doesn't.

But the roommate option -- and we're talking about the kids and how it impacts them -- I guess -- would you have a feel for how -- you've seen children. You have people in your practice that see children. Would having a psychologist for the kid, could you kind of use that data to get a feel for whether what you were doing is making any sense? And if wasn't, you could call the whole experiment off?

Tina Lepage: Yeah, you certainly could. I mean, I think kids are often times more open in a therapeutic situation. And of course, the psychologist knows how to maybe ask questions in a different way to find out what's going on with the kid. But you could certainly have them go to a psychologist for a few sessions and see if the psychologist picks anything up. Do they think that the kid seems pretty happy and well-adjusted or are they seeing any problems there that should be red flags?

Again, kids are all different. There are kids out there who think that their parents aren't happy whose parents are very happy. Kids sometimes look at parents and say, "Oh, my parents are never hugging or kissing or doing this and that. I don't think they -- I don't know if they're still even that engaged anymore." And then you talk to the adults and they have a great marriage.

And so it's hard to really figure out how any particular child is going to be perceiving any particular marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. So to some extent -- I mean, what I'm hearing from you is we might make this decision to stay together for the kids and do the roommate option and we may really not know whether this was a smart move or not until -- we may never know.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. And I think some of it is really a matter of personal opinion and judgment too. I think people have really strong thoughts about this topic often times, about whether you should stay together for the children or not. And so in talking about this we want to put out to people that we're just talking about it as an option and we're not saying that it should be one way or the other.

I think that some people would say -- there are people who are judgmental about it that would say it's a bad example to stay in a relationship where you're not happy, that that doesn't provide a good example for your children and that personal happiness in life is an important value. And then others would say that what's most important and what sets a good example is to stay in a marriage, even through the bad times, once you have kids; and that honoring the structure of marriage, the structure that marriage creates for children, that that's an important value.

And so there's no really clear right or wrong answer. It's not easy for people who are faced with this to decide.

Lee Rosen: Well, Tina, we want answers. Most of us just want to --

Tina Lepage: Right. You don't want to have to seek your own answer to life.

Lee Rosen: We want to go to the doctor, be told what to do and move on. And if you can't do that, I don't know.

Tina Lepage: I don't know. Well, I do think if you're talking about somebody coming into a psychologist in this situation, I do think that is a venue where they can find some answers that feel right for them, because I think that -- we're talking in a general sense about any relationship that could have any number of factors in it. But I think if you sit down with a professional and say, "This is what our relationship looks like. This is how our kids are acting. This is how our kids perceive us," I think you can start to get a better sense of an answer if people aren't quite sure for themselves.

Lee Rosen: Right. I don't see how you would even get to the roommate option without having a professional. I mean, if you're having a really unhappy marriage and -- if you're in that falling out of love thing, I guess maybe you could have those conversations. But so many of the people that I know, when their marriages are disintegrating they're upset and so I --

Tina Lepage: Right. They're angry.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I don't see how you could even negotiate the roommate thing without having a third party in the room that kind of gets it and can help you with the emotional piece of it. That just doesn't -- it's beyond my capacity to have conversations like that when I'm upset.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. I think it really helps because, as you were pointing out, people are often times very upset or very angry in those instances

and yet they've decided -- again, they sort of look at their kids and decide that they just can't do it, that they can't divorce. And sure, if they get to that place and you're going to be living with somebody that you really don't like and are angry with, you probably need some help to make that at all a viable option.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I can barely talk to my cell phone company without getting -- I need a psychologist with me all the time, talk me off a ledge.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Maybe you should just conference call me in the next time you have to talk to your cell phone company.

Lee Rosen: "Hello, Verizon? We've got the psychologist on the --" exactly.

Well, Tina, very insightful and interesting comments from you today. And I really appreciate your help with working through all of this. You've given us some things to think about that I'm guessing -- options we didn't even really know existed. So I appreciate your help with all that. Thanks so much.

Tina Lepage: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: You should definitely check out Tina's website. It's at LepageAssociates.com. That's L-e-p-a-g-e Associates dot com. Lots of great information, not just about the professionals that work there but about -- lots of information about the topics we're talking about. A lot of articles and links to research and resources. Check it out. You can also call their office at (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening today and for being with us. I appreciate you being here. If you'd like to leave a comment, we have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. Or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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