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5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great

This is Stay Happily Married 135, "5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great."

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 and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here with Dr. Terri Orbuch. She's the project director of the NIH-funded "Early Years of Marriage" project. It's the longest running study of married couples that has ever been conducted. It's been going on since 1986.

Now, she's a practicing marriage and relationship therapist for more than 20 years. She's also a really popular advisor about love and relationships and marriage and dating. She does that on radio, TV; she's all over PeopleMedia.com. And she's a research professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and she's a professor at Oakland University.

With all of that amazing research to work with, she has come out with a new book that she's going to talk with us about today. It's called *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*.

Terri, welcome to the show.

Terri Orbuch: Thank you for having me, Lee. It's great to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited. I'll tell you -- and this probably says a lot about my intellectual level, but anything titled "5 Simple Steps," you've

already hooked me. I love that. I just want somebody to tell me how to do it and I love the title already.

So let me ask you, who did you write this book for? Who were you aiming at when you sat down to write this thing?

Terri Orbuch: Well, I think this book is for people who are okay in their marriage, they're good in their marriage, even great in their marriage; but they want to take it to the next level. They want it to be exceptional. And so this book takes my long-term project on marriage and divorce, scientific evidence, and makes it accessible, into simple steps or simple ways to take that marriage from so-so to really, really great.

Lee Rosen: Do you find that a lot of people sort of think they're good but they're not great?

Terri Orbuch: Yes. I think the majority of people, Lee, really think that their marriage is good or it's just okay, and they have a desire to make it better. I think what happens is that we get married and everything is wonderful and great and exciting and passionate at the beginning; but then life gets busy, as we all know. We have children, perhaps. We work outside of the home. We have parents or other family members that get ill or need us. Things get stressful.

And what typically happens is that we put that marriage on the back burner while we're attending or addressing all these other things in our life. And so we really don't pay attention to that marriage or relationship like we should.

And so that's why when we look back at it we say, well, it's okay; it's good, but it's not great. I wish it could be great, but I'm really busy and I'm really stressed and I'm not sure I have the time to do that.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, that really resonates. I totally agree with you. I think most of us are just so busy. And we're okay with things but, yeah, we do have that memory. I mean, I've been married for 20 years but I remember that intensity. And boy, it would be great to go back from -- to get from good back to great and not to have to have all those issues to deal with.

Now, I'm guessing that when you -- over the years of doing your research and kind of figuring this all out -- I want to kind of dig into the five steps. But before we do that, I'm really curious. As you've learned so much about marriage and relationship, are there things that you've learned that really did kind of surprise you, that were not the things you expected?

Terri Orbuch: Yes. I think there were several things that surprised me as I looked at the couples. I interviewed them every other year for almost 24 years.

I think first, the thing that really surprised me is that men and women are so different when it comes to relationships. As a social psychologist, we like to say that in terms of lots of social behaviors, men and women are very similar. But what I found is that when it comes to relationships, men and women ask different questions; they evaluate their relationships completely differently. And the things that are important to men are different from the things that are important to women. So that was really surprising to me.

Two other things that were surprising. First, what I found when I looked at these couples is that it's not the big, huge challenges outside of the relationship that really lead to unhappiness, like financial difficulties or job loss or even the illness of a parent or other family member. Instead, when couples experience those big external stressors, I like to call them, they actually come back to one another and they lean on each other and they bond.

What I found really erodes or tears away at the happiness of a couple are these small, almost insignificant -- seemingly insignificant -- things.

And so what I like to say for couples is that you really need to sweat the small stuff in your marriage. And that's surprising because that's not what we hear in the media and that's really different than I think what we've learned throughout the years. So sweat the small stuff.

Lee Rosen: That is interesting.

Terri Orbuch: I'm sorry?

Lee Rosen: That is very -- what were you going to say? And then I want to comment on that.

Terri Orbuch: Okay. Great. I think if you have a small, little thing that's bothering you, what you want to do is address it. Don't just let it go. Because what I found is that it starts out small but it gets bigger and bigger over time.

And what happens over time is that the big things then are really harder to deal with. Whereas if you would have addressed it at the beginning when it was little, like he didn't put his dishes in the

dishwasher or she throws her clothes on the floor and has makeup all over the counter, talk to your partner at that time because it's so much easier at that time when it's a small thing to address it and change it.

Lee Rosen: Right. That is fascinating to me. And I've noticed that with my friends that the big issues for some people do bring them closer together; and for some people, they're the straw that broke the camel's back. And you're saying it's all about all these little things that have been going on for years that are preparing you or not preparing you to deal with the hard stuff when you get to it. Is that what I'm hearing?

Terri Orbuch: Exactly, Lee. So that if you have a large obstacle that's occurring and it really is the straw in the camel's back, that's because you haven't addressed the small things in your marriage over time. If you do, you're able to handle those larger obstacles or issues and you really become closer and you bond together. So that's exactly what I'm saying, Lee. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Now, we're talking to Dr. Terri Orbuch and we're learning about -- we're hearing about her book, *The 5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*. And so I want to dig into the book for a minute and get a feel, because I am all about five steps. Anything I can do in five steps, I want to do it.

The book says that there are these five steps to make a marriage great. So let's kind of dig into that. What is the very first step that you've identified?

Terri Orbuch: The first step is what I think is really easy but so important. And that is that you have to expect less or get realistic with your expectations about marriage and your partner in order to get more.

What I found is that the main reason marriages are unhappy over time or marriages get divorced over time is what I call frustration. And frustration is the gap or the difference between what you expect to happen in your marriage and then what actually does. So the more "should" statements you have, the less likely those "should" statements or those expectations are going to get met. And then you're going to get frustrated, which leads to unhappiness, sadness, and eventually divorce.

So you need to get real with your expectations. And I encourage couples then to sit down with each other, write down their top two relationship expectations -- those deal-breakers -- on a piece of paper. Ask your partner to do the same thing. Switch the papers and

then discuss each other's expectations. Are they reasonable? What can you do to make them reasonable or how can you compromise?

When we know our partner's expectations, their deal-breakers, we're much more likely to be able to meet those expectations and then our partner is happier over time.

Lee Rosen: Good advice. Expectations. I mean, you do see people that are so happy with so little, but it's more than they expected. And then other people who are so unhappy with so much but it's less than they expected. It really does make a big difference. I know that that screws up my life.

Terri Orbuch: I think it does for all of us, Lee. It does for all of us in all of our relationships: marriage, friendships, parent-child relationships. When we expect too much, we just are bound to get frustrated.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. What's step two?

Terri Orbuch: Well, step two is really simple as well. You want to do or say small things to your partner every single day to affirm them. And so you can say it through words -- first, I should say that it's called affective affirmation. And affective affirmation is when a partner feels like they're valued or special.

And we can give affective affirmation through words, small simple phrases like "I love you," "You're great," "You're special," or my favorite, "I would still choose you if I had to do it all over again." And that sends shivers up my spine every single time I say that. So wonderful.

You can also give affective affirmation through behaviors. You can turn on the coffee pot in the morning because you know your partner needs caffeine in order to wake up. You can send a greeting card to them in the mail. Or you can give them a hug when they walk in the door after work.

These simple gestures through words or actions really make your partner happy and you're less likely to get divorced over time.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's so funny when experts like you tell me things like that because it almost sounds too easy. But, boy, what happens to me as I listen to someone like you and then I go do it because you remind me to do these things, boy, it works. It just works.

Terri Orbuch: It really does. And it's so simple but we forget, like you said, because we get so stressed, because we get so busy. And when I

found this finding out in my data, it was so significant for happiness, it was so significant in predicting divorce. I too had to call my husband and say, "I love you; you're great; you're special," because I forget as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. It changes my life listening to experts like you every week.

Let me move to step three real quick here. There's this 10-minute rule that you say partners need to practice in step three. What is it and why is it important?

Terri Orbuch: It's so very important, Lee, because most couples think they're talking to one another but what they're really doing is just maintaining the household or taking care of the kids' activities.

So the 10-minute rule is every single day -- every single day -- you need to talk to your partner for at least 10 minutes about something other than work, family, who's going to do what around the house, or your relationship. So you need to talk to your partner about something other than those four topics.

And many couples say, "Oh, no. What am I going to talk about?" Right? There's so many other things to talk about, Lee. What you're most proud of, what you regret doing. If they won the lottery, where would they travel to and why?

Many couples forget that when they first met each other these are the kinds of the things, these are the kinds of topics that they were talking about, and it was exciting and new and wonderful. And we need to get back to that period of time. Try to get to know your partner again.

Lee Rosen: Right. Great advice. I've seen these games that people have, little cards on the table where they have these questions the other person has to answer. And it almost sounds like you're saying, hey, get to those kinds of -- do it. Ask the questions.

Terri Orbuch: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Very good advice. Maybe that's the next thing. You go from the books to the little cards we can stick in our wallets and pull out at dinner every night.

Terri Orbuch: That's a great idea. A great idea. Let's market it.

Lee Rosen: There we go. Now, you've talked about -- in the book you talk about keeping the sexuality alive in the relationship. And at some level we all know -- deep down we know that matters. And so we'd love to keep it alive. I'd love to keep it alive. I want that to be on the top of the list. But how do you reignite that passion to keep it alive? What do you do?

Terri Orbuch: Well, I think first of all it's so very true that sexuality is an integral part of a marriage. And you do need to address it; you do need to attend to it. And again, I found that there are simple ways, simple steps to reignite the passion and the sexuality. And it's basically three easy steps. They all mirror the beginning of your relationship.

First, you want to add new activities to your relationship. The reason why your relationship or marriage is passionate, exciting, and sexual at the beginning is because everything is new and different with your partner. So try to add some new activities that you're going to be doing with your partner. A new restaurant, a new class that you go to with your partner every month, a new bottle of wine, a new restaurant; anything that you do that's new with your partner, novel, will add excitement, passion, and sexuality.

Second, you want to add a little mystery, surprise. Use the element of the unknown, again, to mirror or mock the beginnings of your relationship. So ask your partner new and different questions that you didn't know before. Some about their childhood; if they ever had a pet; who were they most close to? Again, remember, at the beginning of your relationship you were doing that. You were asking and getting to know them again. Passion declines when you know your partner, so try to figure out what you don't know.

And then third, my last and favorite example or tip is you want to do what I call an arousal-producing activity with your partner. And it's definitely clean. It's not -- so I can talk about it. What you want to do is do an activity with your partner that produces arousal or gives you both that adrenaline rush. So you want to exercise with your partner, watch a scary movie or even go to an amusement park and ride a roller coaster or a scary ride. All of those activities produce arousal, give you that adrenaline rush. And as long as you're doing it with your partner, the arousal will get transferred to your partner or your relationship, add the passion and add the sexuality.

Lee Rosen: Sounds good. I'm already getting tickets to an amusement park as we speak.

Terri Orbuch: Perfect.

Lee Rosen: Let's hit the roller coaster.

Let me ask you this now. Okay. Now, I don't want to give you a hard time about this, but you have said a number of times -- you used the phrase "simple steps." That's in the title of the book, *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*. But come on, this is hard work, isn't it? I mean, you make it sound easy and make it sound simple, but I've heard other experts and they talk about how hard it is and how you have to work at the marriage. Is "simple steps" really an option?

Terri Orbuch: Yes. I actually think so, Lee. What I found from my long-term study on marriage and divorce is that making more marriage happy, making it healthy and stable, does take work, but it takes consistent work and that's what's important.

As long as it's consistent and that you do it every single day, it's actually just a simple change, just simple changes in behaviors and attitudes that can make it happy and that can make it stable over time. So is it hard work? No. But it is consistent work. It's simple changes in your relationship over time.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense. If you're taking all those simple steps, you never get yourself in a position where you're so deep in a hole that you're going to have to do a lot of hard work to dig out of it. That does make a lot of sense.

Terri Orbuch: Exactly. As long as you address the small things, then you don't have the hard work and the big, huge issues and patterns over time.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, I love that all of your advice is based on the longest study of these marriages and relationships. And so to me, when you talk about what to do, it really is based on science, which is very reassuring. I feel like a lot of the advice we get from people out in the world is just sort of opinion and I really appreciate the depth of knowledge that you bring to all this.

What is the one thing -- if you had to give one piece of advice about staying married and making it work, what's the one thing you'd want to leave our listeners with?

Terri Orbuch: I think the one thing that the happy couples in my study continued to tell me time and time again over 24 years is that in order to really be happy, in order to have an exceptional marriage, you need to focus on the positive. Instead of constantly looking at the negative and what's going wrong and focusing on the problems, switch your

approach. Switch your viewpoint and focus on the positive. Try to look at what's going well in your marriage. Try to look at your partner and look at the positive things that you love about your partner. Instead of trying to fix the problems constantly, look at trying to add positive elements to your marriage.

And that's so very important, Lee, because that's what the couples in my study continue to tell me and those were the couples who were happy exceptional and had great marriages over time.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic advice. Terri, thank you so much for taking time to talk with us today. I appreciate it.

Terri Orbuch: My pleasure, Lee. Thanks so much for having me.

Lee Rosen: If you'd like to find out more about Terri's book -- and my thinking is, hey, buy a copy of this thing. The advice is solid and it really is five simple steps to take your marriage from good to great. So it's available. It's a Random House book. You can get it at Amazon, all the -- Barnesandnoble.com, all the book stores you can find this thing. *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*.

You can also find out everything that Dr. Terri is up to at DrTerriTheLoveDoctor.com. We'll put a link to her site in the show notes right here at Stay Happily Married.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you got something good out of this. I'm guessing I'll see many of you on the roller coaster. And I hope you will join us again next week. We'll be back, as usual; same time, same place.

Until them, I'm Lee Rosen. Stay happily married.

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