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She's Put On So Much Weight, What Do I Do?

This is episode #149 of Stay Happily Married, "She's Put On So Much Weight, What Do I Do?"

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. One of the biggest problems America is facing today is obesity. Our lives have become so sedentary that weight gain is inevitable. But what happens when it is your spouse that is dealing with these weight issues? Your spouse was sexy, attractive and to drool over right before marriage; and now, a few years later, obesity happens.

I have Paulomi Raiji here with me on the phone. Paulomi is a licensed psychologist with Lepage Associates, where she helps couples with body image issues, among other things. She was born in Mumbai, India, but she was raised in Michigan.

Paulomi, welcome to the show.

Paulomi Raiji: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: This obesity thing, I mean, it really is – it's all anybody is talking about. I go out to dinner with people, we're trying to eat a nice meal and everybody wants to talk about the diet they're on and all that. It really is omnipresent.

Let me ask you, does weight gain affect every marriage? Do you see more and more couples looking at this issue?

Paulomi Raiji: I wouldn't say that it affects every marriage. But just like you said, that since obesity has become such a global epidemic we do see couples coming in. That definitely seems to be an issue that comes up often. I wouldn't say that it's the main issue that brings couples into therapy, for example, but it's definitely just become sort of part of our culture and so therefore affects us in many ways that we don't even realize.

So I definitely see that couples do come in with a lot of concerns about their partner in terms of just in general just getting more activity, just being more sedentary. And it affects the overall quality of the relationship because they're just not doing a lot of new things. They're feeling less energy, less enthusiastic about life, those sort of things.

So I think it indirectly affects the relationship and in ways that sometimes they don't even know because it's not like they're directly coming in because of weight issues.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's kind of sneaking up them. Now, I have to ask you, I grew up buying my blue jeans – my parents were buying my blue jeans – at Sears. And we always bought the husky size, which is a word I now hate – "husky."

But I have to ask you, we're talking more about women gaining weight than men, but is this an equal opportunity problem? Do you see just as many issues where they're coming to see you because the man has gained weight?

Paulomi Raiji: Yeah. I have several individual clients that have come in – and they're men – for weight issues. So I think it's become, again, just a global epidemic, affecting not only men and women but children as well.

So it's not just sort of a women phenomenon anymore; it's affecting all different races, all genders and now even children. So that's why there's a huge concern that it's just sort of seeping into every race, every gender in our society.

Lee Rosen: It's happening across the board. Yeah. Well, let me ask you, in your role as a counselor talking to couples that are having issues in the marriage, does a woman gaining weight have more of an impact on the marriage, or is it just as big an impact when the guy is adding the pounds?

Paulomi Raiji: Well, I think that – that I think would be the difference between men and women gaining weight. I think that it's still a little bit more

socially acceptable for a man gaining weight. We tend to see men kind of gain weight around their bellies and that's sort of seen as them getting settled, being more comfortable with their partner or just feeling more settled in their life. And so that's more socially acceptable than it is when a woman gains weight. That's sort of seen as more of a personal flaw.

And to tell you the truth, it's more of just how women judge other women. So we're more critical of ourselves and other women. So that's kind of where that comes from. Men are just sort of less judgmental as women can be. And that's sort of a general statement, but a lot of the criticisms come from women itself. We're just a lot more harder on ourselves than men are.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's good news. I guess I can have that danish when we finish talking. I'll start bringing snacks to the shows, yeah.

Well, how does the weight gain impact – how does it affect the marriage? What do you see happening?

Paulomi Raiji: Well, like I mentioned, it's a very complex issue, weight gain. And so a lot of couples coming in, like I said, they don't really come in because one person or both partners have gained a lot of weight. It's usually a lot of other complex issues going on in the weight.

But how it manifests is that there's just not a lot of newness in their relationship. They've both become just sort of very sedentary. And the fact of the matter is, when you start to gain weight you have less energy. You have less enthusiasm in your life. You just sort of feel literally weighed down.

And so it's – to bring that sort of excitement to a marriage, which marriages need, is just not there because you're not feeling so great about yourself.

So that's sort of what I see when couples come in is that because they sort of have this extra weight on them, they don't feel as – they don't necessarily feel good about themselves and so they don't really know how to bring that sort of new aspect into their relationship. That creativity is sort of lost.

Lee Rosen: Right. What about the whole sexual relationship? Does weight gain impact that aspect of the marriage?

Paulomi Raiji: Yeah, definitely. And again, I wouldn't say that couples come in and say that directly because I think that's a very – you know, it is a very sensitive topic. And generally, it just might be that the person

themselves who's gained weight – or both couples – just don't feel as attractive and so they're not even interested in sex.

And to take it a little bit deeper than that, some couples may just have so many issues that they use their weight as a way to stay away from each other. So that's – and they might not be very conscious of that; that might just be an unconscious thing that they've sort of put on weight to sort of justify their distance from their partner.

So again, these sort of issues come up when couples come in because they don't sort of recognize these sort of patterns in themselves unless they come and sit down on the couch and sort of talk about these things and understand what this weight gain is sort of serving in their life.

Lee Rosen: Well, that was an interesting comment you just made about people gaining the weight to sort of justify the distance in the relationship. So it's a chicken or an egg question.

I mean, do you really think that when you look at a couple sitting in front of you where, let's say, the wife has put on a few pounds too many, is that really a cause of the problems in the marriage, or is the weight gain something that – which is it? Which comes first?

Paulomi Raiji: Yeah. You know, I don't think it's something that's either/or. Nor do I think it's a direct cause and effect relationship in terms of weight gain either causing an unhappy marriage or the reverse. But I will say that many individuals do cope with painful feelings through food.

So if someone is unhappy in their marriage, it can definitely "cause" for them to gain weight because they may start to feel depressed, angry, resentful, and use food to cope with their emotions.

And then the reverse can happen as well. They might be going through something in their own life – like, for example, losing a job or just general stress in their life – and they use food to cope with that. And then as a result, it can lead them to feel very unhappy in their marriage because they just don't feel good about themselves.

Lee Rosen: Right. You mentioned – you've said a number of times that people don't usually come in just because of the weight issues. That they're there for complex – they have other issues that cause them to walk in your door.

But are there sometimes couples where that really is the issue? Like, they're coming in because husband just can't cope with the marriage anymore because wife has gained so much weight?

Paulomi Raiji: Definitely. There are couples that come in and just say, I'm just tired of him or her not really taking care of themselves and I'm just – and they do have a lot of guilt that they're not seeing their partner for who they are as a person and just sort of focused on their weight gain and not sure how to help them and how to approach this topic with them. So it's definitely something that does come up.

When there's further exploration, you can see that the weight gain is just a symptom of a much larger issue that's going on in the marriage or in the person itself. So they can present that as the reason why we're here and there's more exploration; there's a lot more going on in the relationship and weight gain is just a symptom of it all.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That's very interesting. You hear people say, "Well, I just love you for who you are and I don't care what you look like." But everybody who says that is always saying it early on in the relationship, where everybody looks pretty good anyway.

I mean, do you buy it when somebody says, "I don't really care what you look like"? Does that really hold water anymore? Or do people really – are they pretty obsessed with what their partners look like?

Paulomi Raiji: Yeah. That's a very interesting question that I'd like to go a little bit more deeper into. Because I think that we'd all like for someone to just say to us that we – I really love you for who you are. It's just sort of a very romantic notion of love. And it's truly the kind of love that lasts through thick and thin.

And when people get married, I love you for good times and bad, in sickness and health. And that's sort of a romantic notion that we all want to feel and to say to somebody else.

But I think it's important to sort of explore what does it really mean when you tell somebody or when somebody tells you that they really love you for who you are? And I think it's this notion that you've connected with them. You've connected to their sort of core values, their core beliefs, their spiritual beliefs, those sort of things that are much more stable in a person than sort of their physical appearance or their job or some of the ways that we define ourselves.

Because we're so externally focused, we tend to define ourselves by the way that we look, what size jeans we wear, what kind of job we

have, how much money we make, those sort of things. And as we all know, those things can change. I mean, they do change.

And so this notion that we really love somebody for who they are begins if we're able to sort of love ourselves for who we are. So we've connected with our core values, our beliefs, our sort of spiritual values, those sort of things. So when we're able to do that with ourselves, meaning that we're more grounded in ourselves, then we're able to sort of connect with other people in that way and sort of find a partner that we've connected in that way with.

Now, that doesn't mean that weight gain still doesn't happen. But it's approached in a very different way when you've connected with that person for their values and their sort of morals and beliefs in their life.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Do you find that when you're dealing with couples that you end up having to sort of split them up in terms of the meetings with you and work on individual issues as well as working on things in the couple? Does that happen? Because it certainly sounds like a lot of what we're talking about is not just working with the couple but it is working on yourself.

Paulomi Raiji: Yeah, definitely. And I think particularly with this issue, if weight gain is something that's a big concern for both of them, or just one of them and another person wants to bring it up, I think it is something that needs to be explored individually first.

Because since it's such a sensitive issue and such a complex issue, it's important for the person who wants to bring it up with the other person and to tell them what's sort of affecting their marriage and affecting their attraction to them. It's important for the person themselves who wants to bring it up to take some responsibility in that, to explore the whole relationship in general.

Because a lot of times, like I said before, gaining weight has a lot of emotional issues. So there may be sort of a change in dynamic in the relationship, meaning the husband or wife might be working more or not available as much. And the other person might be feeling very lonely, very isolated in the relationship. And so using food to cope with those feelings or just becoming generally more sedentary because they're just feeling very depressed in the relationship.

So it's important for the person who wants to sort of bring this up to take responsibility to see am I – what role am I playing in this sort of manifestation, in the sense that somebody's not happy and

gaining weight in the relationship? And so that's a really important piece.

And so it's not to feel guilty about it, but it's to take responsibility and that it's not just that person's problem only.

Lee Rosen: We see in a lot of marriages that are in trouble, we see infidelity. Do you see much of – for instance, husbands blaming their infidelity on the wife's weight gain?

Paulomi Raiji: I definitely see that. And I think that that's usually the sort of – when this sort of issue comes up and it's sort of avoided, I think it definitely can lead to either the husband or wife going outside the marriage.

And so that's why it's so important not to avoid this topic and to dig deeper and to see what's going on, so that it doesn't lead to either the husband or wife going outside their marriage to fulfill their needs. But definitely they sort of justify that, "Well, you know, you let yourself go and I have needs and so I went outside the marriage."

And so really exploring what's going on and trying to sort of understand what is really happening in the relationship that's causing it to be the way that it is.

Lee Rosen: Right. So let's say my wife has put on a few pounds, having a little trouble squeezing into, say, the airline coach seat in the back, am I better off to mention it or am I better off to just keep it to myself?

Paulomi Raiji: I would think that it's better to – I would say that it's better to definitely mention it. Again, but it's mentioned that you really – it comes from appreciating the person for who they are, like we had talked about before. So that's a very different way of approaching your husband or wife when you are appreciating the person for their values, their morals, like who makes them up, independent of what they look like physically.

So when you approach your wife that way, you approach with a lot of love and respect and you're approaching her with this sort of issue because you want her core qualities and her core values to shine. And because of her weight, she's not feeling good about herself and so she's not able to be who she really can be.

And so when you push somebody in that way, they become less defensive. They see that you love them and that's why you're bringing it up to them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good advice. Now, what other things should I be doing? Aside from the idea of talking directly to my spouse about it, is there other advice that you would – other things you would suggest to someone who really – who has a spouse that is just kind of expanding?

Paulomi Raiji: I would say that weight gain generally – like you mentioned in the beginning, that our society in general has become pretty sedentary. We just are very fast-paced lives. So there's lots of fast food; I mean, everything is just – we just don't take that time for ourselves to really take care of ourselves.

So I would suggest – if your partner has gained weight, I would just suggest what can I do to help this person? Maybe I can take more responsibility and bringing in healthier foods and taking some responsibility and cooking so that the person doesn't have all that burden on themselves.

Because let's face it; losing weight is very difficult. And when you have support and you have support from your spouse, it becomes a lot – not easier, but at least it becomes like, okay, this is not just about me; this is a whole family changing. And so it's not that they're just isolated and it's just their problem; it's that the whole family's on board and supporting that person and encouraging that person to become healthier.

Lee Rosen: Right. All good advice. Makes a lot of sense. Paulomi, I know that you are engaged to be married. Now, you're –

Paulomi Raiji: Yes.

Lee Rosen: You spend your days counseling couples, working on their marriage, and here you are about to get married. What do you feel like you've learned? What are you going to do differently than all these folks that you are spending time with in your office?

Paulomi Raiji: That's a good question. I think that what I've learned is how important communication is and how important sort of approaching that person in a loving, caring; less of this sort of positional effect but more so that this is my husband or this is my wife and we're one, essentially.

And so the way that you approach the person is not from this sort of "you need to do this for me, and if you don't then you don't love me" type of thing. It's a very different way of approaching the person

because it's coming from a place of love and why you really married this person.

So when you can see them for that and remember that, then when problems happen – because that's – stress is going to happen in a marriage. That's just how life is. But you can approach it in a lot different way when you see the – when you remember why you married that person to begin with.

Lee Rosen: Well, you are certainly fortunate to be in the position you're in in terms of learning this much about getting married. I'm sure it will make your marriage a lot smoother than what a lot of us have to go through figuring it out on our own. So we wish you the best with that.

Thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk through this topic. It's very interesting stuff and it does affect a lot of us. Thank you so much.

Paulomi Raiji: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Paulomi is with Lepage Associates. And you can find out more about her and her practice by visiting the website at LepageAssociates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. But it's LepageAssociates.com.

You can also reach them – they're in Durham, North Carolina. They serve the whole Triangle. They're at (919) 572-0000.

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