

Announcer: This is Episode No. 158 of Stay Happily Married: How to Avoid Speed Bumps in the Relationship Road Trip.

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy married.

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Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. You know, let's face facts. No relationship is perfect. In the relationship road map, there are potholes, speed bumps and road kill that all couples have to try to steer clear of. More often than not, when we have stopped paying attention, we run into something we didn't mean to hit. The best way to protect yourself and your spouse is to spot the troubled areas on the road ahead before you hit them head-on.

I'm excited today. I have with me, Dr. Karen Sherman. Now, if you're one of those folks like me who multi-task, if you want to look at Karen's website while we're talking to her and about her, she's got two of them. One of them is at [choicerelationships.com](http://choicerelationships.com), and the other is at [drkarensheer.com](http://drkarensheer.com).

Now, Karen is a psychologist in New York. She's been in private practice for more than 20 years. She focuses on relationship and marriage counseling, and how to help people in marriages achieve their greatest potential. She's an author, she wrote "Mindfulness and the Art of Choice: Transform Your Life." She also wrote "Marriage Magic: Find it, Keep it and Make it Last."

She's got all sorts of experience online. She's very active in the forum; she's a featured author in the forums at Yahoo Personals, at [thirdage.com](http://thirdage.com), at [hitchedmag.com](http://hitchedmag.com). Most importantly, Karen's been married for 30 years, so not only does she have advice for us as an expert, but she's lived it. She's been on the front lines for 30 years. She's got two daughters, a grandson. She can give us the firsthand experience and expertise we need. Karen, I'm excited to have you. Welcome to the show.

Karen: Hi Lee, it's nice to be here. I'm going to make one correction: celebrated my 36th anniversary just yesterday.

Lee: Wow, yeah. 36 years. I'll tell you, I feel like I've been married a long time, but you don't meet many people that make it to 36 years. It's almost a miracle in this day and age. Let me ask you this. You talk to couples all the time. Are you finding - we're talking about how to avoid these speed bumps in the relationship - are you finding that people have done anything in advance, any sort of preparation or expectation setting about the troubles that are going, inevitably, to come?

Karen: Well, you know, Lee, that's not really a very romantic thing to talk about, is it? I think that some couples think that they do so they will have some vague kind of discussion. They'll talk about their values, perhaps they'll talk about religion. Do you want to have kids, if you're going to have kids, is the wife going to work? But they won't get down to real nitty-gritty kinds of things.

Lee: Right. That makes sense. Well, I guess until you've hit those speed bumps it's kind of hard to know what's coming. But in my mind, this kind of expectation setting and getting these ground rules in place, this might be the most important thing you can do at the beginning of the marriage. Am I on track with that?

Karen: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I think that really, aside from the romance, because I think that so many times our media does us an injustice, our media as far as our movies, the books, the songs that we have a chance to escape to, we forget they're an escape. They really do us a disservice because it's not what marriage, long-term relationships are about.

So it's important to look at the reality, and so if couples would talk about things like the nitty-gritty of the money and how we're going to handle big-ticket items, the checkbook, things like that. Talk about when we annoy each other, how are we going to have that discussion? How are we going to talk about how we please one another sexually? How are we going to discipline the children? You know, the real nitty-gritty things. Not the general stuff, but really, how do we expect . . .

We are going to have free time. How do we expect to spend that free time? If one of them thinks, "Well, when it's free time, I'm going to be off with my friends," and the other one is thinking, "Oh no, free time means that we get to relax together," that's going to be a problem. So that's the kind of thing that they really have to start to look at.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Do you ever have the opportunity to get in early with people? Do they ever come to you pre-marriage or early in the marriage to sort of set these ground rules?

Karen: Sometimes they do, but unfortunately most people, not just couples, only look for help when they're really having a problem. I know that for many years, the Catholic Church has asked that couples go through Pre-Cana, and since I'm not Catholic I can't speak specifically to what is offered in that kind of a program, but I think they were, at least, thinking along those terms of trying to prepare couples for marriage. So no, unfortunately, a lot of couples don't, they get more caught up in the idea of planning their wedding, and they don't think about planning for the long term.

Lee: Right. What sort of issues do you see by the time folks get to you when they haven't done this expectation setting in advance?

Karen: Well, what most couples walk in and say is the problem, is that they have communication problems, but when you dig a little bit deeper, it's really because they tend to feel disconnected from each other, and what I mean by that is they start to feel like their partner's not available to them. They don't feel that their needs are being heard and recognized. And again, if they had had the conversations beforehand and understood each other better, that might not be so much the case. And what's really important when we do work is for them to learn how to express those needs in a way where they're not attacking each other and where they can really speak openly about what it is that will make them happy.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Now, if they're already in the midst of these issues but they'd like to stay together for the next however many years to get to 36, is it possible to set those expectations and to anticipate what's coming? What I'm really asking is: can you work your way out of the trouble you're in while also preparing for what's to come?

Karen: Oh, absolutely. If I didn't think that I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. Again, as you said before, do people come when things are going well? No, but very often once there is a problem, it gives the opportunity to look and then from that point, say, "Okay. Now let's come up with a template about how you work with problems when they come up." I think one of the things that couples need to know is: you are going to have problems.

I was just working with a couple this morning and I said to them, "Just because you've done this work doesn't mean you're not going to have problems. All this does for you is it teaches you the process by which you can work through your problems when they occur. Hopefully, you're going to have less problems, but it's really more about learning a way to deal with your issues or the way that you get to express yourselves so that you can go through them more smoothly."

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. Now, are you finding, with the people that you're seeing, that part of the problem is that they have certain ideas in their heads, maybe ideas about romantic stuff that went on in their life, their personal history or past that maybe magnifies the road blocks that they're running into, or are those things more likely?

Karen: Well, I'm going to answer that in two parts. Again, I think that we don't really know what a relationship is about. I think this is, again, not going to sound very romantic, but if you want your relationship to work, you have to work at it, and I think that a lot of you don't realize there's work to be done. I was working with a couple years ago where they were recovering from an affair and at one point the gentleman said, "If I'd had any idea going into marriage that it was this much work, I don't know that I would have even gotten married."

So people have to know that. A relationship is a live entity, it's like a plant. You can't just buy the plant and expect it to live. You have to take care of it. And so

you do have to work on it. So that's in regard to the romantic part. But the other part is that all of us have baggage from our past. Some of us have just a little bit, some of us have, as somebody once said, the entire tourist set.

But what happens is, in our relationships we are the most vulnerable, and so without realizing it, those issues creep into our present relationships. And as I said, we don't realize it. Our mate says something or doesn't say something, or does something or doesn't do something, that triggers us.

And all of a sudden, we think that what our mate just did is what we're reacting to, and what really happens, with a little work is we find out that it's really not what was going on with our mate, but it really has set off something sensitive from our past. Now, that gets a little bit more complicated to work with, but again, it can be worked with. So yes, our past does come into our present relationship.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Are there times in the relationship where people are more likely to run into road blocks, or there are phases or stages of life that we should be anticipating as causing trouble?

Karen: Yes. That's a great question. First of all, which may be a surprise to the audience, is the first year. Especially in this day and age, a lot of couples live together previously, so you would think that the first year is going to be easy, but in fact it's not. There's something that happens just by making the actual commitment that changes the dynamic of the relationship. So the first year is bumpy.

Certainly, when children come, that's a very, very stressful time for a lot of different reasons. There's tiredness, there is an expenditure in finances that you didn't have before, there's the difference in the way the attention goes out, so for a lot of reasons that's a very stressful time. As a matter of fact, the childrearing years are the most stressful for a couple. That's when marital satisfaction goes down the most.

Very often, when the woman is pregnant the first time, that's when we see a lot of affairs that go on, which seems counterintuitive because you would think, oh, this is when the couple's going to be really bonded, but again, this is when the male might feel like he's not quite as important.

Certainly, the teen years is another very rocky period for a couple. And again, when the children leave the house during the empty nest period, because a couple has to transition again. Retirement, finally, is going to be another bumpy cycle. So we know those for sure are times when things are going to get rough.

Lee: Right. So I've got two teenagers, and I can tell anyone that's wondering, you're absolutely right about that one. Thanks a lot. Now I need to worry about empty nest and retirement, yeah. Okay. Now you've brought me down. But seriously, when you know those things are coming and they're inevitable, these things do

happen in all of our lives, and if you know that those road blocks are on the horizon, how do most people react to that? Do they get ready?

Karen: Well, again, I think whether it be those periods where you are likely, not everybody is going to have trouble, but those are likely times, or anything else that is stressful like things that you don't expect. A parent getting sick, an elderly parent getting sick; in this economy, somebody losing their job. Unfortunately, what many of us do is we revert back to old methods that we used to handle stress, and unfortunately many of those methods are not really productive.

The best thing to do would be to talk about it, to talk about your feelings, to share them. And when one mate is talking about their feelings, that the other mate does not dismiss it, because each of us are different people. And so, we may not have the same reactions, and it's not that one is right or one is wrong, but to be able to hear your mate and to just say, "Yeah, I understand that that may be how you feel." To be supportive of one another.

So if you can talk it out and sort of say, "OK. How can we prepare for this," that will be helpful. If you're going to go on a trip, let's say, what is best to do is to talk about, "OK. What are we going to pack? How long are we going to be gone? Where are we going to stay?" Well, it would be the same if you were going to be going into the situation where you have to prepare for some difficulty.

Lee: Right. Great advice. Now you've learned what you've learned both academically, in 20+ years of practice plus the degree, now 36 years of doing this day to day, being married. With everything you've learned in all these years of thinking about this and working on this, what do you boil it down to? What is it that you recommend that couples do in order to really have a healthy, strong, long-term committed relationship? What's the secret?

Karen: Okay. Couple of things. First of all, what I want to tell couples is that when there's a problem, you don't bail out. First of all, there's actual research that says even when couples are going through rough times, five years later those very same couples are okay. So don't bail because the chances are that if you haven't learned to work your problems through with one partner, you're not going to do any better with the second partner.

The other thing, and I think that for me this is probably the most significant thing in my marriage and in my life, within each of us we have the power, and I don't mean that in a negative, we have the ability to take charge of our lives. And when it comes to a relationship, I work very much on the principle of action equals reaction. And so, what I do is going to impact how my husband will react, and what he does will impact on how I react. And that can happen in very, very subtle ways. So if I don't like the way things are going, I can change it.

So I'll give you a real quick example. Several years ago my husband and I, who both have very, very hectic schedules, we're finally going to go out to have a real fun kind of day. We needed it. And for whatever reason, I don't even remember, really, at this moment, what it was, something went down south. He said something I didn't like, I responded back in a negative way, he reacted to me, and in a few minutes we weren't having a real good day. And then I just got quiet for a moments, and I thought to myself, "Well, this isn't what we wanted today."

And so, I calmed myself down and I decided to say something nice, and he responded in kind, and within a few minutes we were back having the day we both wanted. And what I'm suggesting is that everybody - now, that's just a small example - but that everybody has the power to do that. So that would be what my biggest recommendation would be to people. Take control of your life, take control of your relationship because you really can make a difference.

Lee: Wow. That is a terrific note to end on. Karen, I really appreciate you taking the time to visit with us today and to share some great advice. Thank you so much.

Karen: My pleasure.

Lee: If you'd like to learn more about Karen, the website is [drkarensheerman.com](http://drkarensheerman.com). I'll put a link to that in the show notes so you can just click on it to get there. You can also visit her website, [choicereationships.com](http://choicereationships.com) as well. Lots of good information and material at both of the sites. Check them out. Thank you so much for joining us today. We'll be back a week from now. Until next time, stay happily married.

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