

Announcer: This is Episode No. 159 for Stay Happily Married, how to be in a couple and still be free.

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

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Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Have you ever felt suffocated in your relationship? Perhaps, you feel that you and your spouse are always fighting. It would seem as though these fights and arguments have consumed your relationship whole. No matter what you do, you can't seem to escape from one argument before you're into another brawl with your spouse. When you're stuck in the seemingly endless loop, the best person to call on could be your spouse.

I'm joined today by Dr. Tina Tessina. Tina is a licensed psychotherapist who has been practicing marriage and family therapy in California for over 30 years. Tina has her own radio show, as well as a blog which you can view at [DrRomance.typepad.com](http://DrRomance.typepad.com). Tina has been featured on shows such as Oprah and Larry King and if her outstanding social prowess was not enough, Tina has written over a dozen books, including "Money, Sex and Kids" as well as "The Commuter Marriage". Both of which have been featured on our show previously. Welcome to the show, Tina. I'm glad you could join us.

Tina: Well thank you, Stephanie. I'm really glad to be here.

Stephanie: Good, I'm so glad you're here and looking over everything from this latest book of yours, it seems it takes a lot to be a couple in today's stressful world, and it's my understanding that you have a new definition for the word couple, and what exactly would your definition be for this?

Tina: Well, I don't know how new it is, but it's broad. My definition is any two people who want to be together, whether they're living together or not, and make a lasting relationship with each other, would qualify to be a couple in the terms of this book.

Stephanie: So, being a couple isn't limited by marriage or anything like that. You could be gay, straight, friends, anything as long as you're working symbiotically.

Tina: That's right. The techniques in this book would even work for, say, a brother and sister living together.

Stephanie: Oh, okay.

Tina: Or long-term roommates, because what it's about is how to work out all the things that come up when you're spending every day in each other's company and sharing living space and all those things. And not have to fight about it, not get into power struggles about it.

Stephanie: Exactly, and I think people don't realize that, that even when you're in a situation like a roommate situation, or even a brother/sister and close family relationship, that there's a lot of things that you face every day that you don't have to be in a romantic relationship to understand what it's like to live with someone and be that close all the time with someone. Now, your book, it's called "How to be a Couple and Still be Free". What does it mean for a couple to be free, exactly?

Tina: Well, being free is being able to do what you want. Now, none of us gets to do that 100%, because life has limits and everything has consequences, but what I don't think works is what we used to call compromise, which is giving up what you want to make your partner happy. Because I think that develops resentment, so, having the freedom to be yourself and to say 100% of what you want, even if you don't always get that and to work it out with your partner in an attitude that we're both going to help each other get what we want. It really is a feeling of freedom.

Stephanie: Now, do you think that when people are in relationships where they can't express themselves, in situation like that, do you think that that's what makes them feel as though they are kind of chained down?

Tina: Absolutely, absolutely. And sometimes, the only reason they can't express themselves is because they believe they can't express themselves. I get lots of clients in my office who, when I say well why don't you talk to your partner, your husband, your parent, whoever it is, your child, about this? They say, oh no, I couldn't say that, that would hurt his feelings or that he would get angry or something. And they haven't even tried it yet.

Stephanie: So you don't know until you actually try, the worst thing they could say is no.

Tina: Right, right, well unless there's a real anger problem and it's a scary person, then that's a whole other issue to deal with and that has to be dealt with, you can't leave yourself in that situation.

Stephanie: Right.

Tina: But people often damp themselves down needlessly, and say, "Oh if I let him know, let that person know this about me, then they won't like me anymore." Or if I let them know I want this or I don't like this, or whatever, they'll be upset." Then you're just scrunching yourself down and limiting your ability to express yourself, and you don't even know if those things are true yet.

Stephanie: So, in your opinion, it is really possible for couples to have a committed relationship and not feel restricted by them, other than making sure that everything is communicated and their needs are expressed, is there anything else that a couple would need to do in order to make sure that they don't feel restricted and that they do feel free?

Tina: Well, you need to develop what I call a relationship infrastructure, which is ways to talk to each other, and ways to deal with each other. Some of the simple infrastructures are: How do we do meals? Do we cook together? Does one cook and one do the dishes? Do we eat together? Is it just haphazard? That's an infrastructure for your relationship and how you communicate about emotional issues and how you tell each other this isn't working for me, and how you make sure that when you communicate something important like my mother's birthday is next week or something, that you make sure that your partner hears it and registers it.

How you get intimate with each other. How you deal with cleaning the house. All those things are relationship infrastructure and once you put them into place, if you put good working infrastructure into place, you do need to change it from time to time because life's circumstances change from time to time.

Stephanie: Right.

Tina: But you don't need to rebuild all of it again from scratch. Once you get a good way to talk to each other, which might be just saying, can I talk to you for a few minutes. That little introduction puts your partner on notice that it's time to pay attention. It's different from just chattering on about what Suzie said last week and all that stuff. It sets a scene for a discussion and that's one of the step-by-step processes we have in the book, is how to set the scene so that you're not scaring your partner or getting your partner ready to fight, but getting your partner ready to listen and cooperate and work with you.

Stephanie: Now, this brings back memories from being in college and living in a dorm and having a roommates schedule of who's doing the cleaning, you're setting the boundaries ahead of time. Now, is there one spouse, be it male or female or the dominant spouse or the passive spouse that's going forward and that should be setting this infrastructure because a lot of times when someone comes into a situation like that and they're trying to set rules, as it would seem, they might seem like they're being a bit of a nag or they're whining and fussing. How would you go about it so it wouldn't seem as though you're trying to control everything about the relationship?

Tina: Yeah, you need to talk about the idea without saying, "I think you should do this." That's when you really are parental and you are too pushy. But you can always say, I heard this, or I read this and I thought it would work really well for us, what do you think? That what do you think part of the statement is what opens the door

for your partner to participate and feel like they have equal rights to make these decisions, but if you come at them and say, "I read this book or I listened to this podcast and we have to do this, then you're going to get resisted."

Stephanie: Right.

Tina: I think the three most important words you can say in a relationship are, tell me more.

Stephanie: Oh. And . . .

Tina: So, I want to hear you, is a really important aspect to creating cooperation, because we have a tendency to get excited about our idea or think we found a solution to something that's really a problem and then sell that like we're a salesperson. I have clients that come in to me, and I say to them, "I'm not the jury and I'm not the judge, you don't make your case to me, what I want to do is help both of you work this out so that it works."

But people tend to make a case like they're talking to a jury. Or they're selling something or they're presenting something at work. That is not a cooperative situation. That's a competitive situation. What we want to do is get into a more cooperative situation and tell me more opens the door for that. Or, what do you think, opens the door for that.

Stephanie: Now what would you recommend if there was a couple situation where one party was more than willing to listen, to cooperate, to negotiate, but you had someone who was, you know those kind of people, they're so stuck in their ways, they don't want to change anything for anyone. I'm sure you've come across this, is there anything you would recommend to do to just kind of help nudge them along, just maybe to see if they can try it to see if they like it.

Tina: Not only do I have ideas, but I have particular guidelines in the book for handling it. There are guidelines for gentle persistence, which means coming back again and again without making a big deal out of it. Planting seeds and letting the seeds grow in your partner, so giving your partner a chance to see the benefit of the ideas.

There's guidelines for solving it for yourself, if you're not getting cooperation then you need to solve the problem for yourself and not consider your partner's wants because your partner's not telling you their wants and solve it for yourself but leave the door open for your partner to say, hey I don't like the solution you came up with and then you can say, "Okay, tell me what you want."

Stephanie: Okay. So, even them just saying that they don't want to do it opens the door.

Tina: There's several guidelines in the book, step-by-step guidelines, for how to get around the parts where you're not getting communication.

Stephanie: Right.

Tina: There's a section called Reassurance and Overcoming the Power Struggle Habit.

Stephanie: So, now this book, the people that you're writing it for, what do you see as the biggest problem facing these couples today?

Tina: Well, I think there's not enough understanding about what it takes to be in a long-term relationship. I think people that grew up in divorced households, for instance, didn't see their parents go through day to day negotiations and disagreements and whatever. Other people might have grown up in intact but dysfunctional families, where there was a lot of fighting or too much silence and they never saw any working things out.

So, they didn't learn those skills so they have to learn them somewhere. You don't learn them really from serial dating. You don't learn them from dating and then splitting up the minute a problem shows up. First of all, you can learn the skills because they're in the book. But, you learn them by working through things together and figuring out how it works and having the patience to do that and not letting your fear take over. And considering the relationship important enough to make it work well.

Tina: And that's interesting, because just this morning, I actually heard a statistic on the radio that talked about couples, and so often people are getting married and divorced within the first few years of marriage and they were saying that as soon as these couples are hitting a speed bump that they're not sure how to handle it. They don't have the correct coping tools and they're getting a divorce.

It was shown that couples who fought through that and just tried to make it work, once they hit that five year mark, they talked to these couples again, and they were so happy they didn't get divorced, they were more in love than ever, they're so happy and over time they learned to actually cope and work through these arguments and disagreements rather than fleeing and regretting it later.

Tina: Exactly. I see a lot of people whose relationships are very, very brittle. They shatter at the first pressure. You can't go through life without pressure. You can't go through life single without pressure, and you can't go through life married or coupled without pressure. There's going to be pressure, things are going to happen.

Creating a working partnership out of two distinct individuals is not a simple thing, it takes time and it takes learning about each other, and it takes figuring things out and trying new things until you get what works. If you haven't seen

much of that, or been around it, and you're susceptible to all the stuff about love and romance through a lot of misinformation running around in the air. That's why I'm glad you do these podcasts, by the way.

Stephanie: We're always looking to help.

Tina: There's a whole lot of advertising and fiction, shows, TV shows and movies and stuff that give very unrealistic ideas of what working out a long-term relationship is. In fact, I've remarked a lot that in the ongoing series on TV, they very seldom let a couple have a relationship that goes on. They want that tension, that sexual tension of we're off again/we're on again/we're off again/we're on again. If people buy that as what reality is then, that's going to create problems in their love life. You have to learn what it takes to make a relationship work.

Stephanie: That's exactly true. Just thinking about what you said now, I'm thinking back on shows that were huge hits, they were on for, the better part of a decade, Seinfeld, Friends. You have people like Jerry who had a new girlfriend every week, and you'd hear these stories and obviously they're designed for entertainment but when you have people who are watching TV and it's being used almost as a training mechanism, we're learning that it's okay to break up with people.

We're learning that OK to release yourself from the relationship at the smallest hiccup, someone burps during dinner, they steal off your plate, they blow their nose loudly, little things like that, that seem to irk people and then turn into larger arguments because of silly little things they don't work through. They look at people as if they're disposable and they can move on to the next one and it will be better.

Tina: Yeah, and that's such a destructive idea. It's destructive to your personal life and it's destructive to society. We need to learn cohesion. We need to learn how to get along with each other. We need to learn how to do more than texting or Facebooking with each other. We need to learn how to be in the same space.

I was just talking to a journalist about growing old alone, how many people are now growing old alone. They don't have children, they don't have extended families and if you let yourself isolate, then you're in real trouble when you get to old age. You need people around you. You need to learn how to make connections with people.

Of course, your most intimate relationship is the best way to do it, but the techniques in this book even work for relationships, say, at work, for learning how to negotiate cooperatively, instead of competitively, instead of I'm right and you're wrong, going to what's going to solve the problem.

Stephanie: Exactly, exactly. It can be used in pretty much any situation, I think, in life.

Tina: Sure.

Stephanie: Any time you encounter any other person, it's always good to know how to best communicate your point to them.

Tina: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie: So, this begs the question then, what led you to write this book? Besides obviously what you're seeing in everyday relationships, is there anything personally you found or was this just something that was bugging you and you just had to have it said?

Tina: Well, you have to understand, this book has been on the market since 1980, so I don't know, what is that 20, 31 years now.

Stephanie: Thirty-one years.

Tina: So, it was a long time ago when we decided to write this book, and Dr. Spock and his baby book was the big new thing, and I heard him interviewed on TV or radio, saying that he designed the book for a parent with a screaming baby in her arms. At that time it was assumed the mom would do it, in her arms to be able to get the answer from the book right away, right in the middle of the chaos. I thought, you know that's exactly what couples need when they're fighting, they need a book, a resource that they can use that will tell them exactly what to do right now, in the middle of this chaos, to change the chaos to a working situation.

So, we developed our Negotiation Tree, which is the step-by-step, if this is going on then do that, and if this is going on then do that and once you get past that step, then go to this step. So, like the first thing is, is the problem clear to you? And then there's a branch; if yes, state your problem to your partner; if no, can your partner help clarify the problem by discussing it. So, it goes through the whole step-by-step process of turning an argument or a problem into a discussion.

Stephanie: And this is the Negotiation Tree?

Tina: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie: Okay, so in line with the Negotiation Tree, in the book you also mention that there are five steps to Cooperative Negotiation, what would these five steps be?

Tina: The five steps to Cooperative Negotiation are: to define the problem, set the stage, agree to negotiate, state your want, explore your options and decide.

Stephanie: Okay, so and this just helps lay out a floor plan, if you will, when you're going through discussions and negotiations about how it's going to be resolved.

Tina: Right, and each of those five steps break down into smaller increments, so you can figure out where you are in this negotiation, like I see in my office many times that couples can't get anywhere because they never agreed to negotiate, they're still fighting. The one person is trying to solve the problem, the other person is still fighting and they haven't gotten on the same page about it. So, if they stop and, say, wait a minute, will you work with me on this and help me solve this problem? The phrase that we suggest you use is: I want you and me to both have what we want. I want to help you get what you want, I want you to help me get what I want, let's solve this problem, let's figure out what will work.

Stephanie: A win/win.

Tina: The whole thing is designed on win/win. So, you can figure out where you are and why, especially if you have a recurring argument that you keep getting into which is pretty common in relationships, you can figure out why this argument doesn't lead anywhere, why it just keeps coming back and cycling around. You know, you give it up and you go away and you may calm down and everything but you haven't solved the problem.

Stephanie: It's still there, lingering.

Tina: Yeah. How to solve the problem.

Stephanie: Okay, so now, like you said, this book's been on the market for 31 years now and, it's been such a success, but why is it that you believe that this information is still relevant for such a long time period and I feel even more so now, this book was written 30 years ago, but I feel that with the way marriage trends and long-term relationship trends are heading, this book is even more relevant now probably than when it was written.

Tina: Yeah, it was relevant for different reasons when it was written. It was relevant when it was written because people felt locked into roles. The woman had to do this; the man had to do this, or, even same sex couples would pick a role. One would do the feminine role; one would do the masculine role, even though they were both same gender.

That's changed, but the process of how we work out what really works for each of us and how we're going to do it together, I think that's just universal in all relationships, in all cultures, in all languages and we got away from the cultural expectations and just went down to the basics of, it's like talking to people about how to cook, not what you're cooking, but how to cook. You know, you need a pot, you need a heat source and you need vegetables and you need protein and you need whatever.

Just the basics and then if you want to add tasty sauces that are from your culture to it, that's great, but the cooking is still the same process. Everybody goes



through that same process, baking is always the same process, cooking is always the same process. Negotiation in a relationship is always the same process, and we always need it, we cannot have a relationship without it. So this is very, very basic in that way, but it's also very applicable to all kinds of different situations.

Stephanie: So it seems like one of the major things that we can take out of this is that communication and negotiation are key in making any relationship work.

Tina: Absolutely, and we get tired of hearing that, just like you want to lose weight and you hear you have to exercise and eat less, and you get very tired of hearing that. But the truth is that's what works, and there's no other way around it. Actually, one of the things we did in the book was fix it so communication could be a breeze, could be really easy. The hardest part about it could be overcoming the old bad habits you have. But once you see that the new processes work, then that's very motivating to keep doing the new processes because, wow, look at this, we've been struggling with this for months or years or weeks or whatever, and all of a sudden now we're not struggling anymore. We figured it out. That's very motivating.

Stephanie: Exactly. Well, thank you Tina, so much for taking the time to talk with us today. Tina has several books out and the one we've been talking about today is, "How to be a Couple and Still be Free", and we will put a link to that book on Amazon in our show notes.

You can find out more about Tina by visiting [TinaTessina.com](http://TinaTessina.com), that's T I N A T E S S I N A.com, or you can visit her blog at [DrRomance.typepad.com](http://DrRomance.typepad.com). Both of which will be in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you too, to comment on this, or any other episode, call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083 or e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Stephanie Lockwood and until next time, stay happily married.

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