

Lee: This is Episode Number 191 of Stay Happily Married: The New Definition for daddy.

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

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Do you have what it takes to be an involved father figure? Only in the most recent decades has the idea of the typical family structure shifted. Where it used to be that women would stay home and raise the children, we now see mothers going back to work. With roles and responsibilities of every family changing, the parents have got to change with it.

Fathers are stepping up to the plate and taking a more involved role in their children's lives. From preparing meals and helping with chores to taking the children out for an afternoon, fathers are getting more involved in their children's day-to-day lives. Do you have what it takes?

Tony Delmedico is a licensed marriage and family therapist with a private practice in North Raleigh, North Carolina. He works with individuals, couples, children and families to alleviate psychological suffering and improve relationships. Tony is currently working on a manuscript called, "The Journey Toward Deep Fatherhood".

It's easy to see that Tony's passion in life is being a father. Tony has been a traditional, a stay-at-home, a single father and a blended family dad over the last 15 years. He really has seen it and done it all.

Welcome to the show, Tony. I'm so glad you could join us.

Tony: Thanks, Lee. I'm very glad to be here, and I'm really excited and honored to be talking with you on this topic. It's very near and dear to my heart.

Lee: Well, I think for both of us, this is a topic of importance. I've been a dad for 18 years now, so I've had my fill . . . no, I've had my time with it. I've also had my fill of it but we'll save that for another day.

I've got to ask you, I think the world has changed a lot in many ways, here in the U.S. at least, but in a lot of ways it hasn't changed, I think, as much as we sometimes think it has. I still feel like there's this idea that dads still have kind of a hands-off role with the kids. That that hasn't really evolved as much as sometimes we think. What's the deal with that?

Tony: You know, Lee, I think you're right. As much as we'd like to think we've moved forward, I think men are sort of dragging our feet here. Certainly,

historically we've been hunters and gatherers and explorers and defenders in the world, It's only in just the last generation that men, and fathers in particular, have been asked to be nurturers in the home instead of providers, or in addition to being providers. I think it's just going to take some time for us to get caught up with what the culture is asking of us.

Lee: What's that all about? Why is it that men are just now stepping into this role? We've had all of human evolution, what has been holding us back? Why is it just now getting to that point?

Tony: Lee, I'm not sure that we've been held back, necessarily. I think there have been some changes over the last generation that have really caused a groundswell here. One is just the pure economics of it. It used to be that one earner in a household could support a family but now, with pressure on the middle class and flat wages over the last 20 or 30 years, it takes two wage earners to barely keep a family afloat sometimes. I think just the sheer economics of it have forced men to begin to share more duties and roles around the home, both in nurturing and providing a psychological safety net for the family.

Just to add on to that, now with women working and being educated, even though they still make on average just 75% of what a man makes, there are women that make significantly more than their partners now and so couples are sitting down and saying, look, maybe the mom traditionally now is the career woman and the dad has decided to step back into the home and take care of the kids full-time. You're seeing that more and more as well.

Lee: Those are interesting points and they very much ring true to me. One thing that I wonder about is we're being asked as dads today to do something that we didn't really see happen in our own lives. I think because we're in this shift, that feels to me that part of the problem here with making this transition is we didn't have dads that played the role we have to play.

Tony: I agree with you completely. It's almost like, "Hey, wait! I'm not sure I remember signing up for this," but all of the sudden we're thrown into it at 100 miles per hour. And you're right, our dads were 30-year career men or 30-year service men and then they retired, but they were gone away from the home physically, if not emotionally.

We don't have any training. We don't have any inheritance, emotionally, to do this kind of work. Many of us were parented with a hammer so as we step into the role of a parent, culturally our imprint is to pull out the hammer, and many of us know that's not the way we want to parent going forward. We may not know what to do, but we know what we don't want to do.

There are no role models. Even in the culture there are no role models. I think that men in the home, in general, many are still portrayed as bumbling fools. They can barely get the kids off to school in the morning or baby-sit so that mom can have a morning out. Even the culture is behind that way.

Lee: You really nail it when you say we know about the hammer but we don't want to use it, and then you use the word "nurturing". That's kind of the thing I think we'd like to be able to do but we don't really know what that means. That really does feel like that's the gap that we're stuck in, between the hammer and nurturing. Is that the way you're seeing it?

Tony: I do, and just to extend the metaphor a little bit, it's almost as if a man who wants to do things a different way, he has to figure out a way to melt down pieces of that hammer and begin to craft a whole toolbox full of different tools that are unique for different situations that you typically find in the house. Women have had generations to get the tools honed and crafted and passed along, and we are trying to figure that out now with crafting this new toolbox.

Lee: Right. It's a challenge.

Tony: It's like alchemy, in a way. You're trying to make gold out of this base material that you've inherited.

Lee: Yeah, you've got your work cut out for you with that, I suspect.

Tony: For sure.

Lee: You're talking about an economy that's been this way. It's not new. The economy is bad today but we haven't had that 'one parent at home with the kids' kind of thing in most segments of our society for a long time. Really, the world has changed in that way. I'm wondering, as you've watched that change, when you see dads having to step up and do more kid stuff and take a more active role there, because mom is going to the job just like everybody else, she's gone from 9 to 5 or more than that, what kind of issues do you see in the family where dad really has no choice but to be in the game or the kids are going to be in diapers wandering down the street with nobody looking after them?

Tony: Lee, I'm not sure what you're asking there. Could you maybe refine the question or clarify it for me?

Lee: What are the key issues that you're seeing with dad having to step up? What problems is that causing in the family, what problems is that causing for mom, and what problems is that causing between mom and dad?

Tony: Well, I can tell you, for the dads that don't step up, it causes lots of problems. I'm thinking primarily about working moms. What you find, and there's been research done on this, is that women who are working full-time, when you peel back the covers and look, they are still doing the bulk of the work around the house, and even for at-home mothers taking care of multiple children, it's just exhausting.

With couples in that situation, with a dad who doesn't step up and become more involved, I see a fundamental disconnect between the couple. I see the marriage become stale or the partnership become stale and certainly a decrease in intimacy. The mothers, in particular, are typically exhausted. Life becomes a bit of a drudgery. Resentments start to build just a little bit over time and the couple slowly grows apart.

I think in a way it's insidious because the mom is sort of falling on her sword for the kids, the dad's is working as hard as he can for the career, all under the guise of providing for the family, whereas what's really needed is the couple really coming together as a team to try to figure this thing out in today's world.

Lee: Right. We've talked a little bit about intact families where you've got mom and dad together with the kids. You've got a lot of situations today where a father who was involved but maybe was a little absent because of work commitments and just not having a skill set that they need to be involved, but suddenly, because of divorce, they're flung into a single parent scenario. We see that all the time. That's a complete change. How does that impact the child and how do you see dads adapting to that?

Tony: It is certainly a difficult time for dads and kids in that situation. It's like the old country song "Suddenly Single". The dad and the child or children find themselves in the same boat and perhaps for the first time, this man has an opportunity to rediscover who he is as an individual, who he has been as a parent, who he wants to be as a parent, and he really has an opportunity to rediscover the miracle of his own children and get to know them better. It's a wake-up call for many dads that, "Gosh, I've got to strap it on and begin to show up now, not only for my kids, but for myself."

I think the true challenge for single dads is for them to figure out a way to craft a true second home. So as these kids go between two homes now with a bi-nuclear family, oftentimes dads that don't step up, the mother's home becomes the de facto home for the kid and, oh, I've got to go "visit" dad for the weekend. Fathers that have engaged in this work have their

work cut out for them. "How do I create a true nest for my kids so that they feel at home in both places?"

For men, particularly ones that have been checked out a little bit, it's now an opportunity for them to not only hone their masculine skills and qualities but to begin to explore some of the feminine skills and qualities, because you really do have to be both motherly and fatherly in the home when the kids are with you. I'm not talking about the media portrayal of being Mr. Mom. I'm really talking about being Mr. Complete Dad on all fronts.

Lee: Right. That's a powerful image that you convey there. It really does give, I think, folks a sense of where they need to go, but what's the path to get there? What is the pattern? When you see a dad who is suddenly a single dad, and you're working with that guy as a therapist, what really happens? Because I'm sure you don't lay that picture out and, boom, he gets it. What's really happening on the home front with that guy that's now in that apartment with those kids over there? What's the reality?

Tony: If you'll forgive my language, when he walks in, he's going, "Oh, shit. What have I gotten myself into here?" His eyes are open wide. Many of these guys haven't had to cook and clean and do the laundry for themselves, let alone their kids, so they're trying to figure out the mechanics of, "How do I shop and cook a meal for three on a nightly basis? What do I do now?" A lot of these guys, at least the men that I work with, have very common reactions. For those who have been parented with a hammer, they swing the hammer harder or they keep doing the things that just got them in trouble.

Some become depressed and secluded, anger builds and frustration builds and that can turn to rage. Some men try to avoid it and they do it in a number of ways. They can check out emotionally. They can take the kids sometimes and push them off onto grandparents. Sometimes they can sabotage the visiting time they have with their kids so that the kids wind up spending the bulk of the time with the mother so they don't have to deal with it. Or they panic and just re-partner. They grab a new "mother figure" instead of doing the hard work of being a single dad. That's sort of what I see, and my work with dads is just trying to tease those things out so that whatever decisions they make, they know why they're making them.

Lee: Yeah. You describe a reality that I've seen on more than one occasion. It is hugely challenging. We talked a little bit about this lack of role models, that today's dads were fathered in a different way and they don't really have the role models around. I'm wondering if that's a motivating piece of this puzzle. Do we look at our own fathers and say, "Well, we weren't

really happy being raised by that approach. We want a different approach." Is that where a lot of this comes from?

Tony: I think so, Lee. I think for most men, they're not out to accuse their dads or the men of the previous generation. I think most guys simply understand it was a different time and there's a new paradigm afoot. They know they need to do something different.

I'll tell you, Lee, with the men that I work with, they are doing it. They are making movement and adapting. Most of these guys are reevaluating and reinventing who they are, and they're putting everything on the table, their notions of career, their work ethic, day in and day out, and the values that they want to inculcate with their family and their kids. A lot of guys will, instead of spending the traditional weekend golfing with the boys, for example, they're going to be out making the rounds with their kids for all their activities.

YouTube, a couple of Father's Days years back, came out with a video called, "The Dad's Life". It was just a hilarious video about what it's like to be a dad in today's culture. If you're a listener, you can check that out.

Lee: You just mentioned golf. It's like I now realize I haven't played enough golf. That's where I missed out. I've been too busy with these kids.

Tony: You'll find you'll be doing it with your grandkids, before you know it.

Lee: Right, exactly. Let me ask you this. Whether you're a single dad, whether you're a happily married guy with kids, whatever the scenario, if you're listening to this and you're saying to yourself, "You know what? I do want to move from the hammer to being a more nurturing. I want to do more of the things you're describing," because I want to tell you, you make them sound very appealing. You do a good job, Tony, of selling involved fatherhood. It sounds like there are a lot of benefits to it. If I want to make that move but I really don't know how, I don't have those role models and I don't have that background, where do you start? What can I do tomorrow to really start heading down this path?

Tony: That's a great question, Lee. What comes to mind is this idea of a Disney dad, the lights come on and he gets to be dad for four or five days. We sometimes call those Disney dads. They're playful. They're the outlet from the day-to-day routine with mom. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about dads that figure out a way to become an integral part of the family life. It's not magic. The answer is almost in the question. Dads just have to get involved on a daily basis in the lives of their kids, and it's simple. It's not magic.

I've got men who love to get up early so they'll take on the morning routine for the family. They'll be responsible for getting the kids out of bed, making sure the teeth are brushed, the lunches are made and they'll get them off to school. I've got dads that are more night owls so they're more involved with making sure the kids have gone through their shower routine and, again, toothbrushing, and will spend time tucking the kids in and reading with them every night. Those are ways, day in and day out in the trenches, to really become a part of the family. And then just picking up the slack around the house with the other routines, saying, "Well, I'll cook breakfast this week and then you do it next week," or taking the kids for their appointments for haircuts, doing the laundry, or helping teach the kids how to do the laundry and fold their laundry, doing the shopping, just for the day-to-day stuff of life. That's what it is.

Lee: That all sounds good. It's very practical, down-to-earth stuff that you really can implement right now. When you've made this decision, do you announce to your spouse, "Hey, I really want to shift. I want to go in a different direction with my life in terms of my involvement with my kids?" What do you recommend? How do you deal with that with your spouse? Where do you start with her if you want to make this change?

Tony: I think there are a couple things. Oftentimes it's not the dad that walks in and announces, "Hey, I want a fundamental change." A lot of times that pressure is coming from the mom who's overstressed and overworked and saying, "Hey, I'm getting to be miserable here. I need some help. We need to work on this, not just me." It's a mutual dragging to the table, if you will.

As you mentioned in the intro, I've been a dad in variety of settings; a traditional dad in a two-career home, a stay-at-home father, a single dad and a dad in a blended family, and I work with lots of different kinds of dads in all sorts of configurations. I think the main thing is just to open up and have those conversations about, "I want to do something different. I know that something different is being asked of me and I'm just not sure how to go about that so how can we build and craft what we want?"

I think it's just having those open, hard conversations. At the end of the day, if a couple and a dad can do those things, there's a profound rippling effect in the family. The dads wind up more connected with their kids and closer, which enriches the dad's life and theirs, and he becomes a better parent and father, and, frankly, it's just a real turn on for worn out moms, so it reinvigorates the relationship as well.

Lee: That's always a good benefit. I'm all for any reinvigoration that's going to happen. You've defined the term "daddy" in ways that I think are a lot better than the old definitions and you've given us some good advice on

how to get there. Anything else we ought to know on this topic? Obviously, there's a lot of ground we could cover, but for today, any other pointers you want to hit us with?

Tony: To reiterate, Lee, just the fact that it's really hard. This is new territory for men, not just in our culture, but historically and culturally. For women, in support of their partners, just know that he is finding his own way here. He has no support and no cultural underpinning for this. In a way, this man that you're with that's trying to reengage with his kids in a deeper way, is trying to remake himself and his family along the way.

Guys that are stuck in their old ways are going to struggle and they're going to continue to struggle. But the new way is not clear ahead for men, so each man has to figure it out for himself. If they do, they provide an incredibly rich inheritance for their sons and daughters that will evolve for the generations ahead.

Lee, I believe the work that the men do in the home is redemptive. I think it's healing. I think it repairs old wounds in families, and I think in some ways it remakes the soul of the world.

Lee: Very well said. Powerful stuff. Tony, thank you so much for being with us today.

Tony: Lee, I appreciate the opportunity.

Lee: To find out more about Tony Delmedico, you can visit his website at, www.tdelmedico.com. You can also reach his office at 919-623-8118 for an appointment.

To hear more about Tony's thoughts on fathers, visit his blog at deepfatherhood.wordpress.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, we love hearing from you. To comment on this or any of our episodes you can call our listener comment line 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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Until next time, best wishes.