

Lee: This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 197: Do Chemistry and Connection Count?

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 am Lee Rosen and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. How important are chemistry and connection in a relationship? When we meet that special someone we felt the chemistry to keep it going. It was new. It was exciting. When we fell in love, we built a connection that made us feel invincible, and we could conquer anything as a team. When that connection dwindles in a marriage, the impact becomes apparent in every aspect of the relationship. Is there a way to keep the marriage going when the connection is gone?

Dr. Barry Rand joins us today to help answer that question. Dr. Rand received his PhD in clinical psychology and completed the Advanced Marriage Therapy training program with Drs. John and Julie Gottman of the Gottman Institute in Seattle. Barry has been a North Carolina licensed psychologist for 14 years and currently has a private practice in Asheville, North Carolina called Asheville Marriage Therapy. Their website is AshevilleMarriageTherapy.com.

Barry, welcome to the show. I am so glad you could join us.

Barry: Thank you very much. I am very happy to be here.

Lee: I want to talk about this idea of chemistry and connection. I worry about it in my marriage because we were certainly electric in the beginning, but we have been married for 22 years, we've had kids, things change over time. What exactly is the connection that married couples should have? What's that all about?

Barry: The sense of connection taps into a very ancient part of our brain which has to do with our feelings of attachment and security in a relationship. This is the central feeling that couples have that allow them to go through the ups and downs of their marriage but still feel close to each other.

Lee: How important is all of that to the survival and the vitality of a marriage?

Barry: In my experience, it is absolutely central. In my practice, I work very closely with couples first in helping them to identify what I call the negative cycle or the interactions that cause them to feel disconnected. Secondly, when they have started to be able to avoid going into the negative cycle, then I focus on the soft feelings that promote the feeling of connection.

Lee: Okay, I hear you. There must be a connection or we wouldn't have gotten married in the first place, but I am wondering, is it just automatic that you have that connection, that

this is your partner, this is the person you picked, you've got it, or do you have to take some sort of action to build or create the connection?

Barry: For most couples, relationships start with the stage of infatuation, which is a very powerful sort of mating experience, if you will, which overrides our logical brain. Unfortunately, infatuation only lasts a short time for most people, and then the really more important aspect is maintaining the sense of connection without all of the hormones that play into the infatuation.

Lee: Okay. What are some of the signs that you see when the connection is fading; when things are not going the way they should go?

Barry: Well, it depends. Couples will have disruptions, arguments, conflicts that don't get resolved that become chronic, they start to become disillusioned. Further on, one or both people in the couple may feel lonely, and even beyond that you might see couples acting out or individuals acting out in affairs. There is actually a pretty well defined progression that I see regularly in clients that come to me when they are struggling with staying connected.

Lee: Tell me about that.

Barry: I think the first part, like I said, is when there is a sense of ongoing conflict which doesn't seem to get resolved. In those instances one partner, it is not exclusively the wife although it is more commonly the wife, will perhaps be getting angry with her husband in an attempt to reach out and get him to see and to try to reconnect. In those situations, the husband, again, I'll stress it is not always the husband, but for the purposes of this conversation we will say the husband will frequently withdraw, feeling that if they respond to what they perceive as the wife's kind of angry approaches, they will fear that if they respond as well in anger that things will get worse and the connection will be even further damaged.

That is the basis for what Sue Johnson calls the negative cycle; these ongoing interactions in which one partner tries to approach the other, frequently in anger or frustration, and the other partner withdraws for fear that things will get worse.

Lee: Right. I would assume that when you see that cycle taking place that we are looking at, this is a relationship that if something doesn't happen to stop that cycle that this is not going to end well. We are looking at short-term fallout and long-term fallout that I assume could result in the end of the marriage.

Barry: That's true. The way that I think about it and as Sue Johnson promotes is that neither partner is really deliberately trying to encourage a negative cycle. They are really trying very hard to connect, but the paradox is that the way they are trying to connect is actually causing this negative cycle. When a couple is in a negative cycle, by definition it's impossible for them to feel connected.

So, the first task is to start to address the negative cycle and to help each partner to see that even though they have a positive intent, their behavior is actually causing things to be worse for them.

Lee: Right. I hear you. That all resonates in terms of my thinking about what I have seen. What I wonder about all of that is that you hear a lot of talk about the connection in a marriage being challenged at certain periods. You hear people talk about the seven year itch, or you hear people talking about when the nest is empty, when the kids go off to school, that those are challenging times. Does that relate to what we are talking about here in terms of the challenge to the connection?

Barry: Of course, it does. It is interesting, the seven year itch is an interesting phenomenon, and it's folklore, if you will. John Gottman has studied this pretty deeply and his conclusion or his findings are that the so called seven year itch actually starts with the birth of the first child. This puts a particular kind of stress on the relationship in that the wife wants to feel supported in her role, in her thinking about the beginnings of the family, and if the husband does not match up well with the wife at that time, that can actually be subtle beginnings of the couple heading separately. At least, that's Dr. Gottman's finding.

I find that frequently in my practice, especially when young couples come in and they are struggling and we talk about when things started to not be going so well, it is very frequently after the birth of the first child.

Lee: That does not surprise me. I think you hear a lot of stories about the difficulties of going through the first child being born. What are some of the other factors that you see challenging couples and their ability to sustain their connection?

Barry: One of the biggest ones that I see along with the parenting issues are the financial demands, especially again on younger couples where both partners work, frequently with more than one job trying to make ends meet, especially, of course, when they have children. They end up not having enough time to spend with each other. Relationships really require that people spend time together and re-establish that feeling of connection. So, when there isn't time, they will start to drift apart. That is also frequently the breeding ground for affairs.

Lee: Right and today with the economy such as it is today, financial issues are obviously impacting a lot of people. Do you see other challenges for connection aside from that that you're seeing frequently in your practice?

Barry: Not really.

Lee: Okay, those are the biggies.

Barry: There is nothing else that stands out for me. I really find it useful when I start working with a couple to slow things down, go back and get a sense of when things did not feel so good. Really, the parenting issues and the financial issues are the two main areas that I see that are at the origin of difficulties.

Lee: When the connection is in trouble and it needs rebuilding and these folks are showing up in your office up in Asheville looking for help, what can they do? How do you get them from where they are to where they want to be?

Barry: The first thing that needs to be addressed is the negative cycle. I know I am making this sound a little bit cut and dried, but it helps to organize what is going on with the couple to give them confidence that it is not about their personality, it is not about their partner's personality, but it is really about something that many couples experience so that it doesn't feel so overwhelming. Also, to give them a sense that they can actually do something, each individually, that will reverse the direction in which they have been struggling.

Lee: What do you see happening when they start working on that cycle? Are you seeing success with it, and where are they going from there?

Barry: Yes, I see a lot of success. There is one thing that predicts success in my experience in marriage counseling, and that's that each individual has the desire that things work; in other words, that things get better and that they get their marriage back on track. So, when each person feels that way, I really see almost 100% success with couples getting back to positive feelings and a strong sense of connection in their relationship.

Lee: Yeah, well that gives us some reason to hope. That is good news. We have covered some interesting issues here today, and I am fascinated by a lot of what you have said. Is there anything else, any other words of wisdom or any other information you would like to pass along for folks that are struggling with maintaining that connection?

Barry: Some of the other things that I think can be helpful, and I say this because in the area where I live people are frequently closely affiliated with churches, and when couples share a common spiritual direction, I think that can also give them a strong foundation. I do not think it's 100% successful, but I think that shared beliefs really help a couple to have that background commitment to work through times of difficulty.

Lee: Right. Good advice there as well. We have talked a fair amount about the impact of the religious affiliation on relationships, and it does sound like that makes a big difference in a lot of marriages.

Well, Barry, I really appreciate you being with us today. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Barry: It's really been my pleasure, Thank you.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Barry Rand or his practice, Asheville Marriage Therapy, you can visit their website at [www.AshevilleMarriageTherapy.com](http://www.AshevilleMarriageTherapy.com). I will put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach his office at 828-216-0018. Thank you so much for joining us. I hope you will join us again next week. We always love your feedback and comments. You can reach us at our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can shoot us an email at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

I am Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you would like more information, please visit us on the web at [www.StayHappilyMarried.com](http://www.StayHappilyMarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com) or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.