

Lee: Couples Who Click. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 220.

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 the tools needed to make your marriage work? We've all heard the old saying, "Marriage takes work." But how much work does it take? Are we all equipped with the skills it takes to make a marriage work? If you look around at couples you know, some seem to have a better emotional connection. You can just tell by their interactions, their body language, and even by how they behave when they're apart from one another. Do these differences between couples mean that some just got luckier than others? Or are they onto something that the rest of us don't yet know about?

Dr. Bob Dick has been helping couples tap into the skills that they need to make a marriage work for more than four decades. In addition to working with couples, individuals, and kids at CenterPoint Psychotherapy Associates in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Haven Medical Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, he trains other psychotherapists. He's also a two-term former President of and an approved consultant with the North Carolina Society of Clinical Hypnosis. Bob, welcome to the show.

Bob: Thanks. I'm glad to be with you.

Lee: Well, I'm really glad you could join us. All of us have seen these couples where they just seem to click. It's more than just like finishing each other's sentences and knowing how their partner likes their coffee in the morning. Is it just a difference in our perception or are they just lucky or are these couples really onto something?

Bob: I used to wonder the same darn thing in my first marriage. Over the decades, I finally noticed that I, and people in general, choose a lover, a partner, very differently from how we choose our close friends. We treat our best friends real differently than we treat our partners. If you want to be real close and have it go good, then you've got to be close friends with your partner and treat them like you treat your friends rather than the way the culture and the movies and our parents have made us imagine couples are supposed to be.

The part luck plays, it can be important, for sure. But to have a great or a good - and good is way good - enough relationship, it usually means that both partners have had several long-term relationships that didn't become permanent, but lessons, the experiential learning. The lessons that people have in those relationships can help them discover who they want to be and who they want to be with and what leads to comfort and what leads to pain. What really works is treating each other with the same kind of deep respect and concern that we did in the first year or so of courting.

My experience is that some couples do have a great match right off, maybe 5%, and that's pretty small. Those are long-term live together people. Other people, I think, about 20% have a good match. They love each other and they can recycle that even though life is demanding and hard, but I think most couples have a tolerable match, more or less, and I would say about half of couples are like that. The rest of the people, maybe a quarter of long-term, live together couples live in melodramatic hell.

Lee: Yeah. Well, the odds aren't good then. It sounds tough. That leads me to sort of a follow-up question for you. At the beginning of a relationship, for most of us, it always feels like we're in that 5%

that you're talking about, that we're part of a great match. Life is rosy and everything is in synch and we're in love and everything is wonderful. But every once in a while, I see a couple who's been married for a long time and they still have that look in their eyes. It's like they really are just really, really connected. You can just see it. Are they just part of that 5%?

Bob: Well, it can be. It certainly can happen. But I wouldn't want to bet the farm on 5% so not necessarily. I think the skills, and there are some critical skills that are necessary to be really close friends with somebody, can be practiced and learned. Developmentally speaking, it's my experience that most marriages pass through about three developmental stages. Like you said, the first period is being deeply in love, and that's a chemical brain state that makes it impossible, impossible to be rational and logical. In that state, we imagine the perfect partner and we rationalize any discrepancies. It's like an oceanic feeling of being separated at birth from one person and now this perfect opposite sex person is here and we're complete.

Then you live together a couple of years and the brain chemicals wear off, and disillusionment, disappointment begin to build as both partners get to know the person that they really are living with. Often leads to having to decide the third stage is, "Well, am I going to settle for what seems to be just the way it is," with the limitations that they've discovered, or are they going to split to find a better match and that's like the geographic cure. It doesn't work good because you always take yourself with you wherever you go. Or, third, lead to do what I think is the very demanding emotional work that's necessary for genuine, authentic intimacy.

Lee: Right, right. Now I've seen a lot of couples who fall into that second type, those who have decided to split and find a better match. So are you saying that even if someone hasn't been fortunate enough to find a great match that they can work up to that by putting in the emotional work that you're talking about?

Bob: Maybe, not great, OK, because that is pretty rare. It's partly luck and partly you have had several strong relationships that really don't work to learn yourself up about who you want to be and who you want to be with. But good is good enough. Good is real good. I would say that when people realize that we don't have the perfect marriage after a year or two, that we'd hoped for and imagined, you think you know your spouse pretty well and they know you pretty well and you do at the behavioral level. Yet, we and they have hidden lots of things inside because it's real scary to share that deepest personal information of what scares me and what I really want and the vulnerability of asking for that and the risk that the other one won't respect me, won't like me, won't love me, will leave me if I really show them who I really am.

I would say very few people deeply reflect on themselves and really know themselves let alone anybody else. It's a job of work that we're not trained to do because our parents and our grandparents didn't really know much about that. Deep friendship with a spouse is very unusual and so they couldn't teach us. I think partners need to learn by practicing some of the very basic skills of intimacy to be open as opposed to closed, to tell the other person, let them know, really, who I am, what I feel, what I think and to do that honestly, so open and honest. That means not deceiving by omission or commission and being direct, really asking for what I want and saying what I don't want. Those are hard things but couples can learn to share the stuff they usually hide from others who I really am and what really I think and feel and what I really want and don't want and you can practice at that.

Lee: Right, right. So let's talk about the emotional work that you're talking about. People are tired. They're stressed from working lots of hours. They've got kids. They've got all kinds of distractions that take away from their day and from the marriage. What kind of emotional work are we talking about here?

Bob: I think it means being brave and finding somebody that you can feel safe with who can moderate and negotiate. I think people have to learn to stop blaming each other for whatever isn't right and really realize that they're 50% responsible for all that's good and whatever isn't good in the relationship, and they've got to learn to notice and focus on their own limitations and their unrealistic expectations. They have to work past that area of distorted models for marriage that they learned from their folks and the culture and the movies and the books and the magazines, which don't have much to do with the everyday reality of living with somebody.

I think each person needs to deal with their own leftover childhood emotional pains and disappointments and everybody has them. Finding those and sharing them together really brings people much closer in a sort of empathetic understanding when people can with a deeper acceptance and kind of forgiveness of themselves and the other, they can practice that sort of stuff and it is practice. It's a practice. It isn't an end point. It's a continuing forever, daily discipline, learning the grown up ways to avoid conflict and to manage them well enough to deepen the love between two people who really have gotten to know each other. They're not expecting mind reading. They really are asking for what they want and saying what they don't want and that just naturally leads to, I think, a deeper respect for each other.

Lee: Right, right. Now you mentioned earlier that most of us don't have parents that were role models that set a good example of emotional intimacy, that that's more the exception than the rule. How do people learn if they're not getting that role model? How do they really learn to get that emotional intimacy?

Bob: Well, I find that either in the couple and/or in weekly groups - I also do all day groups to teach these kind of skills - that actually experience each other and learning to take those risks and doing that in a setting that is interpersonally real is about the only way that folks are going to learn because you can't learn it in a darn book and you have to kind of experience it up time to get it. It's hard to put into words, but I would say practice makes progress.

Lee: So I'm curious about that. When a couple comes to you for help, how do you guide them along that path? You're trying to make the marriage not only successful but truly happy. What's that look like?

Bob: I guess there's a secret and it's complicated and it's really very simple. To have a really good, close friendship, you've got to continue to treat your spouse the way we treat our very best friends or perhaps, our dearly beloved preschool children, to cherish them and to really listen. For instance, to absolutely take ten minutes a day, every day, to talk to each other and use it to learn about the other person because when the times I've talked and I often holler and one would differ, we need to have saved up a lot of really strong, positive feelings about each other to trust and believe the other one has our best interest at heart, and the only way to do that is to really, really get to know each other. That means finding out stuff that you'd think folks would know but we forget, "Oh, you never knew. Oh, you were wrong."

The only way I know to do that is to kind of talk straight in an open, honest, direct way and be accepting, and learn to be accepting, and learn to be forgiving of myself and the other and the world and reality and all the things that couples can really get into arguments about. They're unavoidable but managing them in a, should I say, realistic way, not hitting below the belt, being kindly and compassionate, which is a challenge under fire. It's the best thing.

I think that there's tactics where people are looking in each other's eyes and then they repeat back to the other what the other one said. That's great except that under stress and fire that the therapist can't do that. Under the intensive stress of life and the challenges of marriage, it's very hard to do that. So there are other more practical things that we can do. For instance, the ten minutes a day thing and really filling out a little questionnaire and then interviewing each other about, "What is your favorite this?" and "What scares you?" and that kind of stuff. It really gets people down and they can stop blaming and focus on their half of what's going on.

Lee: Right, right. It sounds like you're pretty optimistic about people making the changes they need to make in order to make their marriages work. Is that a fair assessment?

Bob: I would say to make them work, yeah. To make them great like in the movies or the magazines, unfortunately that stuff influences us very deeply in an unconscious, unawares sort of way, that's not going to happen. But to be good and good enough, yes. If folks are brave and persistent and determined and especially if they like each other. I don't want to be locked in a room with two people who honestly don't like each other and that is the difference between, "How do we pick our friends?" and "How do we pick our spouses?" We usually like our friends and they like us and really being together, and that's not what we pay primary attention to when we're picking a spouse, unfortunately.

Lee: Right, right. That's a very interesting observation. I appreciate you taking the time to share your ideas with us and I'm curious, any last words of advice for those folks that are listening in today?

Bob: I would say remember, really remember, that every person lives in a separate reality and that the other's reality is equally real as the one I think is real, and those vital skills of openness and honesty and directness can be practiced and they have to be practiced a lot in order for us to learn them good and - I'm reviewing here - constantly to be learning and relearning what the other's inner world is about and exercising and strengthening my acceptance and forgiveness muscles.

I'll tell you, I'll summarize this stuff on my blog, too, and I'll put a few resources. There are very few books, Lee, that are helpful in the self-help area, but most of it is not worth reading. It's just a bunch of, well, they're not worth reading. I know something about books. I'm married to a writer, Peggy Payne, and so I know that the reviews on the outside of the book and the blurbs are just not necessarily what are inside. It can be pretty disappointing but there's a good book that's really practical and practical, by John Gottman, and it's called "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work". That is a useful book. There's another one by a local fellow, Dr. Bryce Kaye called "The Marriage First Aid Kit". Those are good.

Lee: Fantastic. Bob, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it.

Bob: My pleasure.

Lee: You can learn more about Dr. Bob Dick and his practice at CenterPoint Psychotherapy Associates by visiting the website at [DrBobDick.com](http://DrBobDick.com). I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their

offices by phone at 919-215-4703. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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