

Anna: Making your marriage special while parenting your special needs child. This is Stay Happily Married Episode number 223.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. What does it take to keep a marriage strong while parenting a child with special needs? Approximately 10% of individuals within the general population have a disability. With the rise of certain disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders, many couples are now parenting special needs children. So what kind of effect can those parenting situations have on a marriage?

Becoming a parent for the first time is generally a challenge and involves a degree of adaptation. But for parents with a special needs child, adaptation can be much more difficult. These parents must learn to adjust to the unique and sometimes scary path of raising a child with a disability and with the many extra demands that it places upon parents as individuals, having any time to work on the marriage can seem impossible. Our guest today is Dr. Barbara Lowe-Greenlee, a licensed psychologist with Greenlee Psychological & Support Services. She works to help families with special needs children succeed and thrive despite the tough challenges they face. Welcome to the show, Barbara. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Barbara: Thank you, Anna. I'm really glad to be here.

Anna: OK. So let's talk about the reality of circumstances in the world today. What kinds of disabilities in children are becoming more prevalent?

Barbara: Well, certainly autism spectrum disorders are on the rise as far as incidence. I think we're getting better at diagnosing autism spectrum disorders and also, in my opinion, there does seem to be, like I said, a rise in incidence. We've always had our Down Syndrome kids and Fragile X kids and the like, but there's also been an increase of incidence with individuals with disabilities due to the medical advances that we've made. That might sound counterintuitive but we have a lot more premature infants that are surviving and a lot more at-risk pregnancies and infants that are surviving due to our medical advances, but some of those kiddos will also have unique challenges and disabilities.

Anna: So for those who aren't familiar with what really goes into parenting a special needs child, can you give us maybe an overview of daily life for them? I know everyone's situation is different, but just in general maybe, some of the different challenges that they face.

Barbara: Sure. Well, like you said, everyone is different in their ability to adapt to life transitions that we don't anticipate. Life transitions that we anticipate are always easier to adapt to. So in general, becoming a parent will be a transition that one would, at least, have eight months for warning of but becoming a parent of a special needs child, usually it is not planned for unless there's a case of adoption where parents are choosing volitionally to where they're open to the possibility of adopting a special needs child.

So once parents become aware that they have a special needs child, sometimes at birth, sometimes within the preschool year, sometimes even later, there's a period of adaption and depending on where parents are in the process of adaption to the new current reality, life can look a couple of different ways.

When there's first a diagnosis or when the awareness comes that there's a child with a disability, there's kind of the scurry to find out about that disability, the scurry to put resources in place and there's also a lot of emotional adaption sometimes managing grief, sometimes reworking a vision of the future. This needs to happen at the individual and the couple level for married individuals or couples.

For those who are a little farther along in the process, life is going to be a little bit more demanding. Usually, there are more appointments. There might be IEP, school meetings. There might be more specialists involved. There's still going to be sometimes looking for smaller milestones in their children and have to be more patient with their children than what we consider parents of typical children. Overall, it can have a tendency to be all-encompassing for parents of children with special needs.

Anna: Right. I can imagine. It definitely takes a lot of time and energy and lots of patience, I'm sure. When we're talking about any kind of couple, when they begin the journey of parenting a special needs child, what would you say their primary task is?

Barbara: Well, there are individual tasks and there are couple tasks to adapting to these wonderful, precious children that have unique needs. At an individual level, some of the tasks might be managing grief, maintaining perspective, learning how to protect a corner of life for yourself, finding sources of strength, sometimes managing guilt, fear, shame, and finding meaning in the disability experience.

At the couple level, there are certain tasks such as establishing or reestablishing a bond despite that tendency of the child's disability to be all-encompassing, accepting individual differences and reaction and coping with the disability, adjusting roles in a way that feels fair to both partners, regaining nuances of romance and learning how to be a team in the midst of all the needs that are present and given individual differences in coping and parenting styles.

Anna: Right. So when you talk about the different tasks on the individual level and you talk a little bit about how they might have to manage their grief and shame and guilt, those seem like pretty tough emotions when you're talking about parenting and dealing with your special needs child. Of course, those things come up but do you think it's possible for a couple to work through those things together or does that generally have to be on the individual level?

Barbara: Well, I think in an ideal situation, it's on both levels. Just to kind of reiterate, the themes are these children are precious lives, and so sometimes we talk about the process of working through negative emotions. I just want to kind of reiterate that any time we have a shift in our life that's unexpected, we're going to have some of those negative emotions that we're going to work through, and oftentimes it's kind of the loss of a dream of how you thought things would be in adapting to a new dream. Yeah, there needs to be a new dream, a new vision, as a team so we need to kind of integrate this picture of who I am as a parent individually to this child and what this means for us as a couple. So I think it does happen at both levels.

Anna: OK. Right. So when these children, they need a little bit more attention for certain things and care, with all that that goes into it, what do you see happening in a marriage? What do you see most commonly happening in a marriage when all this is going on with the children?

Barbara: Well, what a lot of individuals are aware of is that the incidence of divorce in general is fairly high. It's about over 50% and for couples who are parenting children with special needs, we know that the rate of divorce is a little higher. A big reason for this is parents can have a tendency to pour

themselves into the child. They're just doing everything they can to help their child succeed and be all they can in life, but being a good parent does not equal being a good spouse. We also have a relationship with ourselves to maintain.

All parents feel, generally, a sense of protection and intense love and some sense of vulnerability toward their own children. In these parents, the feelings can be even more intense because of the special challenges that they go through and what I like to help parents work through is prioritizing their marriage. Even if it's not the top priority, just keeping it on the priority list so you can regain some of that bond, some of that romance, some of that friendship, some of that leisure time together. I think that that's important, and it can save a marriage and save the marriage is good for the child.

Anna: Right. I'm sure it would be good for them to see a healthy and happy marriage instead of one that's not working out.

Barbara: Absolutely, and a marriage ideally would be a source of strength and support. It doesn't mean that one spouse needs to cope or parent the exact same way that you do. We often marry people not because they're the same as us, but because we're intrigued by some of their differences. So we want to become a good team despite those individual differences.

Anna: Right, right. In a way, would you see it being possible for a couple and their marriage to almost gain a sense of strength from their child that has these special needs?

Barbara: I definitely think so. These parents are some of the most committed people that you'll ever see and if we could just tweak some of that commitment, reorient it back, just kind of with that reminder that we need to put the marriage on the priority list, that the marriage can become even stronger. Going through the stages of developing communication patterns around solving difficult problems and learning how to maintain or regain that friendship and keep that romance and sexual intimacy in the midst of juggling these challenges can be incredibly rewarding and deepening for the relationship.

Anna: Yeah, definitely. I'm sure. So let's talk about the resources that are out there. What kinds of help are available or is out there for couples who are coping with all the new things, if they're new at it or if they're not new, what are the resources out there for these people who have special needs children?

Barbara: I'm really glad that you asked about that, Anna, because we're talking about the couple and we've kind of been talking about the couple and the family and isolation and, really, it takes a village. I'm a firm believer in support, being balanced so we don't want to spend all our time running from support place to support place so that we're completely burnt out but having good supports in place. When I think of supports, I think of part of my research is actually on children with disabilities and parent/family support that the professionals support, like a psychologist or an occupational therapist or developmental pediatrician or nutritionist and the like. So professional support, also think about educational support as a separate category.

Sometimes, an educational system offers different types of support for kids with disabilities. Social support, which can be one's family, one's friends, advocacy groups, support groups, and then informational support. I think it's important to be knowledgeable about your child's disability and knowledgeable about the resources and how to access them. At Greenlee Psychological Support & Services, I like to help families to kind of balance this picture and look at it as an integrated care package that's not over-taxing on the family.

Anna: OK. Yeah. Good. So back a little earlier you were talking about the initial... when these parents are first finding out about this disorder or whatever the child might have, you were talking about a scurry to understand what's going on, and I think that from what we've talked about, it seems like understanding of the nature of these disorders and the special needs is very important. What do you have to say about that? Do you see it as it being something that's very important, understanding?

Barbara: I do. I actually think a good evaluation can be helpful as it identifies the child's individual strengths and weaknesses. Often I like to start out a therapeutic relationship, especially with a child with special needs, with a good evaluation or reviewing a good evaluation that's been done by another psychologist and other professionals. So understanding the disability at large but within every disability group there's individual differences so we better understand, for example, Down Syndrome, but what a child's strengths and weaknesses are relevant to typically developing children, relative to Down Syndrome and relevant to my child's other skills. So that can be really helpful in so many different ways, including intervention planning and prioritizing.

Anna: Right. So how do these parents find relief - and I don't mean to say that in a negative way whatsoever - but how do they maintain a strong and healthy marriage throughout all these struggles?

Barbara: We think about marriage with children, what a healthy paradigm looks like is a paradigm where's a marriage partner, there's some space to be an individual and there needs to be some space to be a parent/co-parent with your spouse. Getting back to a place of balance can be really helpful. Then just thinking about the marriage, taking a little time for the relationship, remembering that parenting children, whether they have special needs or disabilities or not is a marathon. Just taking time to slow down, enjoy the journey, taking time out for the marriage relationship.

Another important, key skill is being flexible, being able to adjust relationship roles to fit the needs, kind of working as a team. When we think about sports or a highly functioning business team or educational team, you would think that each individual would have strengths and weaknesses and they have a common vision that's functional, but they utilize each other's strengths and they kind of downplay each other's weaknesses and kind of similar, the marriage relationship can work like that.

Then acceptance, being accepting of where the other person's at. One partner might feel strongly that, for example, their adolescent with extreme behavior and mood challenges that might be related to something chromosomal or disability or not might need to be hospitalized and just feel that an intense intervention needs to happen, whereas the other partner might feel that, "Well, I think we just need to go to a psychologist once a week and kind of feel that out." So understanding that there can be differences in intensity and in reaction but kind of coming together on the common goal level, "Wait a minute. We actually have the same goal here so what's a compromise."

Then of course, if there was a need for hospitalization, then a psychologist would recommend that in that scenario, being accepting of individual differences within the relationship but learning how to come together, communicate, problem-solve as a team despite those differences.

Anna: Right, right. I really like the team reference. I think that's a really good point, being able to have your individual strengths and, of course, weaknesses too but then playing up the strengths with each other as a team and then downplaying the weaknesses, I really like that. I think that's great. So is there anything else that we should know?

Barbara: You asked really great questions and these families are precious. They have some unique needs but they are solvable, these are solvable problems in the sense that we can work through and accept this journey and enjoy this journey and have delight and have good marriages and enjoy parenting, while at the same time we are coping with and dealing with life on life's terms, and I'm happy to be a part of that. We're available at Greenlee Psychological & Support Services and enjoy working with families with complex needs.

Anna: Great. Barbara, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Barbara: It was my pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Barbara and her practice, Greenlee Psychological & Support Services, you can visit their website at [www.GreenleePsych.com](http://www.GreenleePsych.com) or call 919-824-5743 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and 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 Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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