

Anna: Relationship Resolutions. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode 233.

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. It's that time of year again. What are your New Year's resolutions, and where does your relationship come into play? At the start of a new year, many people try to set goals for themselves, their relationships, and their families. With the highest of hopes, they plan for the best and most positive possible outcomes. The problem, however, is that some people sometimes set their expectations a little too high and then become frustrated and overwhelmed when they don't accomplish everything exactly as they had planned. Then some things, like relationship resolutions, are given up on altogether.

The reality is that couples and families can sometimes be overcome with all of the little things life has in store; work, kids, taking care of relatives and other pesky responsibilities. In many cases, couples don't cherish and nurture their relationship and end up taking it for granted. They don't realize it's an entity that needs cultivating and developing, just like anything else. Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein[sp], and she is here to discuss how couples can use New Year's as a way to motivate themselves to set goals as a team. A licensed psychologist and the director of Orenstein Solutions, Susan says it is a perfect time to take stock of your relationship, clarify your goals as a pair, and come up with a good action plan for 2013. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Susan: It's a pleasure, Anna. Happy New Year.

Anna: Happy New Year to you! I hope you had a good holiday. I hope everyone had a good holiday.

Susan: Yes.

Anna: So let's start with the fact that people do set New Year's resolutions and yearly goals, but maybe they are setting the wrong ones.

Susan: I think that's right. I think the most common, typical goals we hear people say are, "I want to lose weight", "I want to get in shape", "I want to get healthier", "I want to have a better family life". Generally, that is not even something that people mention, but if they do, if they say, "I want to improve my relationships", it's just so general. It's too general, and people get lost.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Totally.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Anna: So maybe even setting goals as a couple for family and kid stuff isn't really even enough. They should be setting goals for their intimate relationship and partnership that maybe are a little bit more than just general.

Susan: Yes. I think the reason couples don't even think to set goals . . . what I hear in my practice time and time again, is people think they found their soul mate and have a good relationship, or they grew apart and it's not working. They don't realize that there are specific things you can do to nurture relationships. Since they don't even have that mindset, they wouldn't necessarily think that you could

set a relationship resolution. The good news that I want people to know is that you really can. You can set New Year's resolutions for your relationship that have to do with love as a habit.

Anna: OK.

Susan: Yeah.

Anna: That's interesting.

Susan: How do we make it a habit to show our love, to do love, to make love a verb? How do we do that on a daily basis?

Anna: Right. That makes sense. If you think about it, I guess. If you are talking about not just a couple but a couple that has a bigger family and kids and stuff, but the relationship is really the foundation of everything essentially. It's good to protect that and keep it going. What are some good types of resolutions that couples can set for their relationship?

Susan: The resolutions that really work are similar to resolutions for any kind of habit change we want. The traps are the same, too. For instance, if folks want to get into shape and they say, "OK. I am going to get in shape", and take this boot camp class when they have not done any exercise in ages, they are going to feel miserable. They are going to be overwhelmed, and they are not going to want to do it again.

Anna: Yeah. Forget that!

Susan: Forget that! Or the whole thing about fad diets, they really backfire, as do all the things we do that are not sustainable. I think the relationships goals that make sense are the very, very small habits we can put into our everyday life. I can give you some examples of those, but that is where I really love to work with couples, in the specific day to day habits that make love last.

Anna: Yeah. For sure. Let's hear some of those. What kind of things would you recommend to people, or couples that you see? What are the little, basic, simple things?

Susan: My favorite is an exercise that we do in our pairs couples workshop. It's called the daily temperature reading.

Anna: OK.

Susan: I liken it we need to brush our teeth every day if you want to have healthy teeth. We want to take a multivitamin if you want to stay healthy. Well, for couples, you've got to do the daily temperature reading. That is just awesome. It's an everyday, daily thing. That is why it's called that. It takes about ten minutes, and there are five pieces to that. I don't know in this call if I will be able to go through all those in detail, but I can certainly give an example of the first two steps so people get an idea of what we are doing.

Anna: Yeah. Let's hear it.

Susan: OK. Step one is a daily appreciation where you are giving your partner feedback about something specific you noticed that fills you up, that makes you feel good, that makes you feel happy, that makes you feel content. Basically, it is positive feedback. What makes it so rich is you are actually training your partner. You are teaching him or her about you. "I appreciate this because this is what makes me feel good." For instance, I might say to my husband, "I love it when you make the bed in the morning because then when I come home the room just feels more put together." That's actually a biggie for me. Other people could care less if the bed is made.

Anna: No. I totally agree with you. I totally am on the same page about that one. I definitely have to have the bed made.

Susan: Right. And likewise, he will never hear me appreciate him for things he does in the yard because that is not that important to me. He could certainly keep doing those, but he learns about what I like by when I give him feedback.

Anna: Right.

Susan: And vice versa, I learn from him what he likes by how he gives me feedback. It is a way for the person getting the feedback to feel really touched. "Wow, my partner noticed me." Another example would be, "Well honey, gosh, I saw you reading to Sally last night. I saw you stay up and read one more book and it was so cute. I could tell she was just all over that. It was so sweet. It meant so much to me."

Anna: Yeah.

Susan: Sharing those positive moments is a great way to nurture the relationship.

Anna: Definitely. I see that. Even something like, "Honey, thanks for making the coffee in the morning. I really, really appreciate that. It makes my day, every day."

Susan: Mm-hmm. That's exactly right.

Anna: A continuance of just the positive feedback and just even like small little things, on a big scale, when you start to do those things every day, they really add up. Without you even realizing it, your partner probably takes those things into consideration and just runs with it, making everything that much better.

Susan: Right. Anna, what I find so curious, and interesting, is when I have couples do this exercise in the workshop or my practice and I will say, "Have you been doing this before I showed you this exercise." Often, they will say, "I don't see the point in saying that I appreciate this or that. He already knows. She already knows." And the other person is thinking, "No, I don't!" or "You know what, even if I do know, it feels good to hear it again."

Anna: Absolutely. Positive reinforcement. You definitely have to have that.

Susan: Mm-hmm.

Anna: I guess that was one part of it. You said there was another part of the daily temperature reading?

Susan: There are five parts, yes. Would you like to hear the second one?

Anna: Absolutely.

Susan: OK. Step two is new information. Basically, you are turning to your partner and you are giving them an update about your day. You are not going on, recounting every single thing. You just give one single piece of information that interested you that day that helps your partner know who you are, what excites you and what interests you to keep that connection going, to really nurture a sense that your partner is your best friend.

For instance, I might say, "I was driving to work today, and on NPR they were interviewing this man at University of Pennsylvania and he was so interesting. I never thought of this." Or it could be something like, "Wow. It's so weird. I had a dream last night about so and so. I haven't thought about that person since we were in elementary school. Isn't that weird?"

Anna: Yeah.

Susan: It's syncing your brain so you nurture that connection.

Anna: Right. It is like you are teaching them more about yourself, really. You are giving them, like you said, information.

Susan: Right. I think after the courtship, they get married, then there is the work of the marriage, the bills, the kids, and the finances, things get all about business. Hearing new information is a little bit more whimsical. It's a little bit more like, "Let's share in our life. Let's be attuned to each other. Let's have this special connection that is more than the logistics of who paid the bill and who is driving carpool."

Anna: Right. It makes me think that doing that could put you back into something like a dating phase, like when you guys are first talking and first starting to date, and you are learning all this new stuff about each other and about what they did that day and stuff. I think it freshens things up a little bit.

Susan: Mm-hmm. Generally, one of the happiest times for couples is when they first are curious about each other and want to know about each other. What is more flattering than somebody wanting to really know you?

Anna: Oh yeah. Definitely. The new information was number two?

Susan: Yes.

Anna: So, what is number three?

Susan: Number three. OK. Also, Anna, let me go back a little bit. You do the daily temperature reading in order. When I am with couples, I give them a little card that has a picture of the steps. You can also get an app. I'm pretty sure it's free. It's a daily temperature reading that you can put on your phone. It is really easy to access the daily temperature reading if people want a visual. They can get that or they can email me and I can send them the steps.

Anna: So if they were going to get the app, you would search "Daily Temperature Reading?"

Susan: Unfortunately, I don't know the exact search. I can get that for folks. I'm pretty sure if you go to PAIRS, which is the organization that came up with this material in Florida, they have it, they have the app.

Anna: We will put a link for that in the show notes or some information so people can access that.

Susan: OK. Awesome. So step three is puzzles.

Anna: Puzzles?

Susan: Puzzles. What that means is something that you are wondering about the other person, or some kind of question you have for them. It's not an interrogation. It's not a blaming question. What is so funny is that a lot of people say, "Why did you do this? Why did you do that?" Really, that is a blaming question. What is off-limits with the puzzles are those why, blaming, interrogation questions. The puzzles are really about, "I'm wondering about this. I'm genuinely curious. I'm not trying to blame you or shame you or set you up. I'm just genuinely curious, or I'm genuinely confused." Again, it's not because anybody is bad or blaming or nagging, I'm just genuinely confused. It could be as simple as, Wow, over spring break I think we were talking about going to your mom's but we never set the calendar. Did you take those days off?"

Anna: OK.

Susan: That sounds so simple. Why would you even need to have that step? Actually, what I found again and again is, couples think those questions but they don't ask them, or they ask part of them but the other person is walking out the door, and people actually cannot hear each other. The difference with puzzles is that you're actually in the same room, literally hearing what the person is saying, feeling really comfortable, and you get to ask your puzzle. Another example of a puzzle might be, "Mary Jane and John wanted us to go out on a double date in a few weekends. Do you want to go because it seems like last time you were kind of quiet. I'm not sure you had fun." It's a curiosity question. Again, I'm wondering.

Anna: Yeah. Just a genuine question. Nothing accusatory.

Susan: Mm-hmm. It can go very differently if you are on the phone with Mary Jane and you look over at your husband and say, "They are inviting us over. You want to go? What was with you last time?" That could go very differently.

Anna: Yeah. Exactly. Totally. So then what's number four?

Susan: Number four is called concern with request for change.

Anna: Concern with request for change. OK.

Susan: It's concern with request for change. So if you remember, step one was appreciation where you are giving positive feedback. You are saying something you like and why it's meaningful. In step four, you are expressing a concern, something that is bugging you, something that is not going so well, and why that is bugging you. You are giving feedback to your partner. This is the brilliance of the PAIRS folks

that came up with this, which is Virginia Satir and some other folks, by the way, is that at the tail end of your concern you are making a suggestion or recommendation for change. You are signifying to your partner that, "This isn't blame or shame that we're doing here, this is expressing feedback and coming up with solutions."

Anna: Right.

Susan: It is kind of criticism inside out, turned upside down. Absolutely fantastic.

Anna: Yes. In a nice sunny way.

Susan: Sunny way!

Anna: Sunny criticism.

Susan: Sunny. By the way, this is the hardest for just about every couple I've met and just about every individual I've met. How do you give feedback? How do you let somebody know something bothers you without offending them, without going into blame and shame and criticism? How can we move towards these positive solutions with respect and warmth?

Anna: What is an example? Is it the way they say it, or the words that they say? What would be an example of someone maybe, expressing their concern and then having this request for change?

Susan: I think it helps to have the formula, at least, at first. This is a silly one, but I will just use a personal example from my husband and myself. Maybe, some people who love dogs will relate to this, or maybe they will think it's silly. When we first got our dog, we went to a trainer and we were trying to learn how to be good dog parents and how for us to be the alpha dog. We were told we need to eat first. I'd never heard this before. It was very interesting and not feed the dog first, to set an example. I thought that was a little silly. I wanted to feed our dog, Stella, first thing. That really bugged my husband which surprised me. I didn't know it bugged him. He told me, "It really bugs me when I hear you from upstairs. I hear the dog food going in that little silver dog bowl, clink-clinking. It just grates on me because I know you are feeding her before you have eaten. I really want to do this dog thing right. We paid this guy. Let's do it right. So my request is, could you please delay feeding her and eat first?"

Anna: OK.

Susan: So there is an example of a concern with request.

Anna: Uh-huh. Very nice.

Susan: This is different than, "Darn it!", screaming down the stairs. "Darn it! You are feeding her first!"

Anna: Yeah. Right. Exactly. "I told you not to do that!"

Susan: Right. As the recipient there, I get to listen to his concern and truly hear him. It's not a demand, it's a request. So I can say, "Sure" or I can say, "No. I disagree with that." And we can have a conversation. If we do end up having a conversation, it is going to be much more constructive than if he just blindsided me with a criticism without a recommendation.

Anna: Right. Totally. OK. I guess we are moving along to step number five, the final step of the daily temperature reading.

Susan: Step number five is beautiful. It is a reward for couples who have done one, two, three, four because they get to end on step five. They are just coming out of step four and no matter how constructively and effectively and masterfully, we say step four, which is giving feedback, the other person may still have a little bit of, "Ugh. All right. Yeah, I'm not perfect. I have to get over it." So step five is a nice bow to wrap everything up at the end to say, "I want to remind you about my hopes, wishes, and dreams for you, my good will towards you. It could be something like, "I know you are going to play tennis with your friend this afternoon. I hope you have an awesome time." Or "when you go talk to Joe at work today and talk about your raise, I really, really hope that he will give you what you want." You are sharing some support, goodwill, and hopes, wishes and dreams for your partner. You are showing them that you are really on their side.

Anna: Yeah. Right.

Susan: You can celebrate their successes. You can also have a dream for the two of you together. You can say, "I hope one day we will win the lottery and we can go sail around the world." You can say something silly. It's fine.

Anna: Right. Yeah.

Susan: This is not a concern with request like, "I wish that you would get us a sailboat and get us tickets to sail around the world." This is much more free floating.

Anna: Like a dream.

Susan: Yes. Like a dream. Wouldn't it be nice if . . . ?

Anna: Yeah. I got that. So you are just rounding the daily temperature reading out. You are putting the cherry on top.

Susan: The cherry on top.

Anna: There you go.

Susan: I think that is rare, because I think a lot of time when couples have hard conversations, it is hard to remember the positives. Then when they are having good feelings, they don't want to bring up the negative because they don't want to ruin it. That is what I hear a lot.

Anna: Right.

Susan: This way you can share the good, the bad, the ugly and still be in it together.

Anna: There you go. Perfectly said. Susan, is there anything else that we should know?

Susan: Well, again, I think you said you were going to get the link.

Anna: Yeah. I definitely will put that in.

Susan: I can find the link to the app. I would encourage people to learn more about the daily temperature reading or take components of the daily temperature reading including, staying attuned to each other, giving each other feedback, and sharing appreciation, and make that a habit of love every single day.

Anna: Definitely. Yeah. Absolutely. It makes sense, for sure.

Susan: Thank you, Anna. It is always so much fun.

Anna: Yeah. Thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. To find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at [www.orensteinsolutions.com](http://www.orensteinsolutions.com) or call 919-428-2766 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you will 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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