

Anna: Feeding your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married: Episode number 237.

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; I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. How much time do you dedicate to your marriage? Are you taking good care of it? With busy schedules, and work and family responsibilities, it becomes common for couples to focus their time on things other than the relationship. Many different factors will often affect how we end up prioritizing our time, and it's easy for a once-stable relationship to experience rockiness when it gets put on the back burner.

People are surprised when their marriages collapse and die from starvation, but what they don't consider is the fact that starving a marriage takes a long time; it doesn't happen overnight. Though it seems like a no-brainer, it's easy to make excuses for why there just isn't enough time to feed the marriage on a regular basis.

Our guest today is Dr. Don Azevedo, a clinical psychologist with 3C Family Services, in Cary, North Carolina. He's here to talk about the importance of feeding and taking care of your marriage on a daily basis. If you and your partner don't have growth goals for your relationship, chances are it could be stagnating. Welcome to the show, Don. I'm so glad you could join us.

Don: Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Anna: Starvation, huh? It doesn't sound too good. Are you starting to see more and more marriages that are starved?

Don: I don't know if it's more and more. I've been seeing them over my 25-year career pretty consistently. As time goes on, our lives become so much more complex and there are so many more things demanding our time, like the internet, work, the economy, and all this other stuff; people start to take for granted that their spouse is going to be there forever, only to find out that it might only last about 10 years.

Anna: Why do you think that marriages get so low on the priority list in people's lives?

Don: It's easy for it to get very low on the priority list because it's right there with you all the time. The things that demand your attention are things like work; I have to go do my career, I have to earn money to support our family. Our family is growing and our costs are growing, so I need to get promotions at work, more income, or whatever that case may be; and work sucks up more time.

There used to be a day when there was a 40-hour work week. Most people haven't seen a 40-hour work week in their life, at this point. They go into jobs, and it's instantly 60 hours a week. That leaves very little time for home. When we do

come home, if we have children, we tend to focus on the children; taking care of all of that activity. At the end of that, all this work, all the children, there is no energy left even for me to go workout, to eat right, or to take care of my own health, much less to look over at my partner and say, "What are your needs and how can I take care of that?"

Our priorities are upside-down. Truly, if we're doing a better job at this, we start with taking care of ourselves, because there's no relationship without us in it. If we take care of ourselves, then we can turn and take care of our partner's better. If that marriage is stable and strong, then we have the energy to take care of our children. It's only after we take care of those 3 things that we need to be paying attention to work and all the other things that are out there in our lives. Most folks don't organize their time that way.

Anna: What would you say to someone who does have, maybe a really demanding job, and obviously, has a job for a reason? Of course, supporting the family and making money is important, but like you're saying, it's also important to spend some time taking care of the marriage. What do you say to people who might have a really demanding job or kids' schedules that are crazy? What's the solution for that?

Don: Number 1: Any job that you work for, whether you're self-employed or you work for a multinational corporation, will demand as much as you will give. If you don't set the limits, if you don't establish, 'I can do these things and not those things. I can have meetings up until this time, but not after this time.' If you don't set those limits, the company will never set them for you. No company says, "It's time for you to go home; go take care of your family." They don't do that. They work you until you die, they step over your dead body and they hire the next person.

Anna: Yeah. Sounds true.

Don: It's very true. It's not personal. [inaudible: 05:17] You have to set that limit. How do you do that? The way most folks do that is by demand quality; what's demanding their time? That's why children get so high in the hierarchy, in terms of sucking up time. It's because children are vulnerable and they can't do it for themselves, you have to do it for them. Your spouse is an adult; they should be able to do it for themselves, so we ignore them. That even is true for our dogs.

Anna: Yeah, that's true.

Don: I have so many married couples who will come into my office. They'll spend hours feeding and taking care of their dog, and minutes paying attention to their spouse, if they even spend the minutes. It has to do with this demand quality.

Then what happens? Our spouse gets very demanding and we become accusatory of this spouse: “Why are you such a nag?” “Why are you such an immature guy?” instead of really saying it as a starving person calling out to the one place that they can get fed, because they said in their marriage, “I pick you above all other people.”

Anna: Yeah. Makes sense, for sure. It seems like it really is about boundaries in every aspect of your life; making sure that you set those work boundaries and boundaries with the time that you spend on other responsibilities and the kid stuff. Not obviously to put anything completely on the back burner, but it’s all about the boundaries and it’s all about kind of balancing.

Don: Anna, you’ve hit the nail right on the head.

Anna: Good.

Don: It’s about boundaries and choices. There are times in anyone’s career where you might actively make the choice that, ‘I need to put more energy here to get to the next level. At the next level, then I’ll back off a little bit and you can do more things, my spouse.’ That has to be a conscious choice by both people, because if one spouse is working a lot harder at work, the other spouse is working a lot harder at home. We discount how much work there is at home to take care of a family so that when you come back from work, there’s actually food there, clean clothes, and your bed has got clean linens on it. There’s not a dead dog in the house because no one’s cared for it.

Anna: What do you think are the main things? It’s kind of what we’ve been talking about. Since we’re talking about this metaphorical sense of a marriage dying from starvation or something, what do you say really causes a marriage to start dying?

Don: What causes it is neglect; you’ve turned your attention away. Why are you neglecting it? Because you have no goals for it. If you think about all of the other things that are demanding time in our life: Work, work has goals. There are deliverables, projects, and all the rest of that kind of stuff that demand our attention and time. Our children; they bring goals to us because they’re going to school, either preschool or regular school, and there are things that we need to do with them, so that attracts our attention and organizes our time. Our house; maintenance things, cars, that kind of stuff, also have structured time goals that we pay attention to. What we don’t do is set goals for our marriage. What are my marital goals for 2013? That’s the question that every couple should ask.

Anna: What kind of these growth goals do you think that couples can set for their marriages?

Don: There are 4 key areas to intimacy; to truly being intimate with anybody, and in particular, intimate with your spouse. The first one is intellectual goals. I’m not

talking about, as a couple, we have to go study physics, but it's the idea that we share thoughts and ideas. We might have commentary on current events, politics, music, or literature; whatever it is that interests us, we can share intellectually on.

Another layer of intimacy is emotional: Are we sharing how we're feeling, not just about the marriage, but how we're getting along with our kids, our parents, our friends, our siblings, or even with work? Are we sharing emotionally about that, on a pretty consistent basis? Do we have physical intimacy? Physical intimacy is not just sex. Our society kind of goes to sex immediately all the time because it sells, but it's so much more than that. Do we hold hands, still? When you come home, do I get up out of my chair and go find you and give you a hug? Do you come find me in the house and give me a hug? When we're just sitting next to each other in the same room, do we sit in separate chairs or do we sit next to one another?

If you remember dating, if you went and sat in a booth in a restaurant, you sat next to one another, we're all close and comfy. You get married, and you're lucky if you sit at the same table. That's kind of physical stuff that I'm talking about. Of course, sex is a huge part of that. Do we have an agreement about how often to have sex, in what ways to have sex? How sex is developing between the two of us? What's enjoyable? All of those are physical intimacy goals.

Then there's a spiritual aspect to this. By spiritual, I don't mean religious. It can include religion, in the sense that we might go to church together, be in a Bible study together, study the Talmud together, or whatever happens to be our religious path. That could be a part of spiritual intimacy, but it really is more of a sense of, how are us? If I can use bad English, but that's besides the point. That 'us' sense; how is that impacting the world at large? Because we are a couple, because we share these values, because we are growing together; how does that affect our children? Our friends? Their families? The community at large? This rippling effect outward from this incredibly powerful nucleus of a strong and healthy marriage. That's what I'm talking about in terms of spiritual goals.

Anna: OK. Do you think that it would be, maybe, a good idea for couples to think about those 4 areas: The intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual, and kind of set growth goals for each one of those areas?

Don: Yes, every year. When they should do it is in the month of their anniversary.

Anna: OK.

Don: I got married in May. Every May now, it will be 30 years this May, my wife and I
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Anna: Congrats.

Don: Thank you very much. 30 years to the same woman, I should . . .

Anna: Yeah, nice.

Don: My wife and I sit down and we talk about, “How are we growing this year? What are we going to do differently? What new adventures will we have? What areas will we help one another grow in, and how are we going to do it?” We actually get down the specific tactics for accomplishing these kinds of goals. I have to tell you, over 30 years, we haven’t been successful at reaching all of our goals each year.

Anna: I guess that’s a natural thing.

Don: Right, but at least we set them.

Anna: Yeah. It’s a process and you’re constantly working at it, so I think that’s the main thing, for sure. Once it starts to become noticeable, what do you see couples doing to cope with . . . We’re going to go back to marriage starvation, now. On the flip side of that, what do you see couples doing to cope with marriage starvation?

Don: Typically, because they haven’t identified it as ‘our marriage is being starved’, they just know they’re uncomfortable: They’re working too hard, they don’t get enough of one another, and they really want to have more time together. They start living for vacations. They start setting these pearls on a string that they can reach for and grab, and that keeps them alive because they’re starving to death, but they’re going to go eat a whole lot; to continue the metaphor. This binge method of relationship management doesn’t work for long. Just like bingeing would do for the human body with food. Your digestive system gets all messed up; your health is torn to pieces. It’s just not a great way to manage things. The hardest part is that couples will tolerate starvation for incredibly long periods of time.

I have gotten so many couples who have come in and said, “For 10, 12, 15 years, I’ve been slowly dying and this has been deteriorating before my eyes.” Unfortunately, they come to me at a point where I can’t resuscitate what’s there. Truly, the relationship is dead, and the best that I can do is help them to separate and move on in as healthy and as peaceful a way as possible. That’s very sad.

Anna: Yeah, definitely.

Don: I want people to come to me sooner than that. If you’ve been in pain for, I would say just months, but other people would a year or more, that’s the time to come seeking help. If you notice that I’m living for vacations, or I’m living for the weekend, your life is way out of balance, and some kind of correction needs to happen, and that correction will take courage. It’ll take courage to go in to the

boss and say, “I have to leave for home, at least 2 times a week, by 5:00 so I can have dinner with my family.”

Anna: Yeah. That’s important, for sure.

Don: Yeah, but people don’t do that because they’re fearing losing their job. I get it.

Anna: Then they are probably just content enough in their relationship to think that, “The relationship is there and it will be there, and it’s fine. If I could lose my job, then that’s really a bad thing.” They don’t think about actually losing their marriage, which could happen, too.

Don: Right. They could become a country western song, where they lose their job, they lose their marriage, they lose their dog, they lose their truck.

Anna: Yeah, a country song. That’s good. It is sad, though, it really is, because it could’ve been a really great relationship from the beginning. Then when the little things start to build up like that and it’s starved, then the effects just become detrimental.

Don: Yes. They don’t have to do that. There are some very easy, straightforward behaviors you can engage in on a daily basis, just like brushing your teeth, that will help to feed your marriage and keep things going. You still need to set the boundaries, you still need to create the priority time for the marriage in keeping the marriage healthy, but a couple of things that you can do. The first one is do one thing each day to delight your partner and remind them that you chose them over the 7 billion people in this world to be your lifelong partner. Demonstrate each day that you choose them. It can be a small thing. One of things, I make lunches for my wife and I in the morning because it’s easy for me to do. Sometimes, I’ll write on her napkin just a little ‘I love you’, a heart, or something silly.

Anna: See, yeah. That’s so nice.

Don: Right. It took 2 seconds and it delighted her for 2 seconds. It’s not like it’s going to delight her for hours, this is not the effect. It reminded her in that moment that I choose you and that I love you. Make sure that the speech, whatever you’re saying to your partner, is uplifting. Even when you complain, do it in a way that is gentle and let your partner know there’s something going on that’s painful to you, or doesn’t work for you, but is not harsh condemnation of them. Make your speech uplifting.

Appreciate the things that your partner does for you. Say ‘thank you’. Really notice the impact that they had when they did something for you, makes a big difference. When you’re listening to your partner, try listening to understand, not to defend your point of view. Let go of your point of view for just a few minutes

so that you can really understand who your partner is. Then the last one you can do every single day, and it really won't cost you, it really won't, and you'll get huge dividends, just simple common courtesies: Hugging your partner before you leave or when you come home, saying 'please' and 'thank you'; just these little tiny things. When they ask you a question, answering them directly.

Anna: Yeah. True.

Don: These are all things that you do for customers all day long. They are things that you do for coworkers all day long. You come home and you don't do that for your spouse. Couples that suffer from starvation, that's one of the number one things they fail to do, is these common courtesies that they would extend to any stranger in the street.

Anna: Right. Makes total sense. I think that it's easy for people to overlook just the small, little things, even the day-to-day things, like you were saying, just doing one thing each day or showing your appreciation and the common courtesies, that in reality, they actually do make a huge difference in the long-run. It's a shame that it becomes easy to kind of just forget about them.

Don: Yes, it's so true. If we just started doing this right now, if everybody who's listening to this podcast makes a dedicated effort to every day, doing 1, 2 or all 5 of those suggestions I just made, you'll notice in less than a month, your marriage becoming stronger, healthier; your ability to set boundaries in other areas of your life becoming more powerful. Your ability to feel energized and connected in the world will grow tremendously because you're taking care of the one thing that's with you more than anything else in your life.

Our kids are with us for about 18 years, and really, the last 4 of those years, our children are moving away from us. Our spouse is someone who will be with us for decades if we take care of that relationship. The only person who will be with us this closely for decades, the only one of us who won't just step over our dead body and find somebody else, because they care.

Anna: Yeah. So true. Just like your body needs food to grow and develop, your marriage needs food, essentially, to do the same thing.

Don: Absolutely. Yeah. Very good.

Anna: All right. Don, is there anything else that we should know?

Don: If you're having trouble with doing these 5 things and you feel like your marriage is in starvation, come on and see me. I'll be happy to help you.

Anna: There you go, you heard it there. Don, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Don: You're very welcome. My pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Don and his practice, 3C Family Services, in Cary, you can visit their website at www.3CFamilyServices.com, or you can call 919-677-0101 for an appointment. 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. I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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