

Anna: What to Expect When You're Expecting an Empty Nest. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 248.

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 happens to a marriage when parents must begin to prepare for an empty nest? When parents start to prepare to send their son or daughter off to college, they are not only helping to ease the transition into college life for their child but also paving the way for their own next steps - of marriage and an empty nest, that is.

Many families aren't exactly aware of the challenges that arise with big transitions and changes, and therefore they're not as proactive as they could be. Sometimes, a couple isn't really clear on the parenting roles that are played with kids in college. When this is the case, it's easy for parents to be on different pages, and they might not have a solid plan for how to respond to different crisis or critical issues. With a little guidance, however, it can be easy and uplifting for a couple to get back to a positive place, a place where they successfully parent and maintain a longstanding marriage as a team.

Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein, the Director of Orenstein Solutions. Susan says couples can fix these issues by working together to create plans for the expected and the unexpected. An empty nest doesn't have to be a bad thing. It can, in fact, be just the beginning. Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Dr. Orenstein: I'm delighted, Anna.

Anna: What kinds of feelings do you see come up with parents who are about to send a child off to college?

Dr. Orenstein: Full disclosure here, I just wanted folks to know that I have a son who is graduating in a few weeks and we are facing this in our own family at this time. I can speak for myself and I can also speak for families and parents I work with in my private practice. There's a whole host of feelings from excitement and pride and trepidation and anxiety and some sadness, anticipatory sadness. I'm thinking, "Oh my gosh, when the day comes it's just going to be a real sense of sadness." I think you get the whole gamut.

Anna: Right. Then what is the dynamic like between a husband and a wife when they're dealing with these kinds of emotions, these vast emotions, really. Like you're saying, they're kind of all over the place.

Dr. Orenstein: I think in sensitive times in any marriage, the sensitive times, the times of transition either bring people closer together or lead to more stress, depending on if they can turn to each other, share their emotions, embrace each other, laugh together, then the hard times only make the couple stronger. But when there's already tension and they really can't tolerate seeing each other's emotions, it can be another breaking point.

Anna: So then, if there are those big issues between them... Say they're a couple that kind of butts heads when it comes to this kind of stuff or when some kind of big situation like this comes up, they kind of get at each other's throats. What's the best way to address that kind of issue between them?

Dr. Orenstein: I think it's always best when couples can turn towards each other and find a way to talk, to share their feelings, to share their expectations, to share their dreams. Unfortunately, some couples just have, over time, been doing that less and less. They start to anticipate that the other person really won't hear them out or they'll get into an argument. I think this is a great opportunity to say we need to turn this around, we need to be on the same page, be able to talk to each other about the next step, the crucial next step not only for the young adult going to college but the next stage in the marriage.

Anna: Yes. What's that like? The next stage in the marriage? What happens between a husband and a wife when it's, say, they're sending their last child off or their only child off so then it really is, truly, an empty nest and they're just the two of them together again? What happens then?

Dr. Orenstein: It depends on the couple. For some couples they really, they thrive. It's an exciting time. They have invested so much in their family life and they can reap the rewards. They can get some of their time back. But for some other couples they've been hanging on, the cliché is, for the sake of the child, and it's the time where they may be contemplating divorce. It's a really tricky time. It's also a time most couples are hitting middle age, so they're also

probably caretaking for their parents or might be losing some parents at that time or coming across some health conditions. The parents are dealing with their new stage of life as well.

Anna: Definitely, a lot of different emotions going on there. Do you think that there's ever a sense of fear with one partner or another when it comes to having an empty nest?

Dr. Orenstein: I think so. I think when the marriage is vulnerable. We're talking about marriages with the assumption that they both had this child, but I also wanted to speak to blended families where they could possibly each have their own child or they could marry into somebody who has a child going into college. It really is tricky for some couples to figure out their loyalties and, for instance, how much money to allow that college-bound child, how much time and energy to invest in that college-bound child. When the couples are vulnerable, this is just becomes one other sensitive topic.

Anna: I can imagine. So then if we're talking about blended families, what's the best way for a step family member, like a stepmom or a stepdad, to help ease this transition and help with the adjustments that come with making these big changes?

Dr. Orenstein: I think for blended families especially, but also for families where they're both the parents, what's really helpful to the couple and also the college-bound child is to be proactive in having conversations about expectations. What I've seen, I've been on different sides of this spectrum because I've worked a lot with college students and I work a lot with couples and I see the stress from all different angles. What I hear again and again is there's a lot of conflict around expectations, particularly about finances and rules and when they're going to come home and how and when and if the parents are going to rescue the child.

Some things will come up, you can't plan for everything, but what I definitely recommend is before the young adult goes to college for the parents or the parent and stepparent and child to really clarify what the expectations are, particularly around money. A conversation about this is how much we're going to give you or not give you, this is the expectation of how you're going to earn this money, that's so helpful to lay out. You have to remember a 17-year-old or 18-year-old really doesn't have the context of a budget or money or how far \$100 can go. It's hard to remember when we're in our late 30s, 40s, 50s what it was like to be a 17, 18-year-old but we were all one. We didn't come to our knowledge instantaneously. We had things we read, people who guided us, lessons that we learned. I think it helps couples to be really patient with their young adults and remember that it really helps to teach them and guide them and also set some expectations in a concrete way ahead of time.

Anna: With parents teaching and coaching their children, or if we're talking about a blended family, their stepchildren, if they are kind of teaching them and coaching them through different situations and stuff that might come up in college, like you're talking about the money stuff, do you think that those things are a way for a couple to strengthen their own bond because they can come together and together teach the child about this?

Dr. Orenstein: Yes. And I love the word that you used, 'coach', because I think that's a perfect word to talk about how to guide young adults. I think absolutely. When they're learning to have more explicit conversations and be patient with their young adults, they can use those same skills for each other and it can be something they can do together. The opposite is really true. If they don't take the time and have the patience to coach their young adult and see all these opportunities as learning opportunities, the default is a lot of shame and blame and finger-pointing at the young adult, at each of the parents. That doesn't get us anywhere. So if you think about it, I'd rather be patient on the front end than end up in a blaming match weeks later.

Anna: Right. Totally. So with the kids, what's the best way for parents to reassure them about different things, like going to college, the big transition and change? I know it's a huge adjustment for both the parent and the child, but what is the best way for parents to reassure them about that?

Dr. Orenstein: The thing parents can do better than anything is to maintain a really, really strong relationship. That bond that you have with your kids is going to get you through these years. There are certain things you may do to help them through college, but it's much bigger than that. It's sitting down and watching a basketball game with them or going out to frozen yogurt with them or asking them about their day even though they probably won't say more than a sentence or so if they're a typical teenager. I think just showing that you're interested and you care is more important than anything because you want your son or daughter to be able to turn to you when they're stressed out, for you to be their role model and for them to ask you anything. That's the essential piece.

Then in a day-to-day way, as you are sending your young adult off to college, I think it helps to kind of walk the middle ground, to not hype up college so that the expectations are unrealistic

but not to overwhelm them and scare them either. What I mean by that is I know that some parents will look back on their college day and they'll say, "These are the best times of your life. You're going to have so much fun. You're going to meet your very best friends you'll ever have." That's one way of handling it, and I worry that that just sets the bar too high, that when the kid's just having a normal day they might think, "I don't get this." Then there's the other extreme where parents say, "You're going to have to buckle down. You have no idea what's coming. You need to study. How are you going to get a job in this economy?" Gloom and doom. When I say "walk that middle path" I kind of mean like a Goldilocks where it doesn't have to be too hot or too cold, but just kind of a reasonable picture you paint for the kids. They can have some fun, they're going to be learning, they're going to have some hard days, they're going to have some good days, and that they'll be able to handle it.

Anna: Right. I think that's just being honest with them. That's the best thing that you can give them is honesty.

Dr. Orenstein: Absolutely.

Anna: Some days will be good and some days will be bad, just like anything else.

Dr. Orenstein: Momma said they're going to be times like this. Isn't that a song, I think?

Anna: Yes. Momma said. Very true. Is there anything else that you think is an important thing that I should touch on?

Dr. Orenstein: There are resources for parents. They're wonderful resources. A lot of universities have parent programs where they have workshops and online resources. There are a lot of books out there for parents to help them help their kids succeed in college life. There are some specialty books, too, if your young adult has special needs, for instance, autism or ADD or some kind of health problem like diabetes. Those are sensitive issues that can make college life a little challenging, and there are resources at schools for those students. I think parents can really do themselves a favor and get more value out of college by taking advantage of those programs, reading those books. Quick infomercial. I wrote a book for young adults called, "College Companion: Your Survival Guide to College Life." It's a workbook that helps student kind of navigate college life and their emotion life - how to get along with roommates, how to handle relationship breakups, how to stay organized. There are so many resources. The parents and the students do not have to reinvent the wheel.

Anna: I know that is certainly a very interesting time in life, going through college. It can be wonderful, but then it can be also very confusing and a very weird time in your life as far as the children go. It's being 18, 19, 20 and even to 22. It's a crazy time, trying to figure yourself out. I think it's good that there are resources out there for parents to be able to help their kids and guide them.

Dr. Orenstein: No matter how old we are, how young we are or how old we are, we all need loved ones and we all need support. I think it's a myth, really, to say that we need to be independent. I think that's pretty impossible. Anyone who's been successful has had so many people guide them and teach them and support them. Parents are so important, their encouragement, their support, their interest. Just asking a student what courses are you taking and actually listening, being a little bit engaged in the courses, that's giving them a gift.

Anna: Definitely. Well, Susan, is there anything else we should know?

Dr. Orenstein: Again, I think the take-home for the listeners is it's really important at this time, like any transition, to be able to connect, to be able to turn to each other and talk about your worries, your fears, your concerns, your hopes, your dreams. The more people can talk about it, the more they can handle it in a direct way, in a proactive way where they can find solutions. And so I really encourage people to start reading, start thinking about these issues and start having these conversations.

Anna: Just start talking about it, that's the first step.

Dr. Orenstein: Absolutely. Start talking.

Anna: Well, Susan, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Dr. Orenstein: It was a pleasure, Anna. Thank you.

Anna: Good luck with you and your son who's about to graduate. I'm sure he's very excited.

Dr. Orenstein: This may put off some people in the audience, but I will just have to say, "Go Tar Heels!"

Anna: I guess that's where he's going.

Dr. Orenstein: Yes.

Anna: I'm a State person myself, but that's good. It's a very good school, so congrats to him.

Dr. Orenstein: We can say, "Go NC State" and "Go Duke" and "Go Tar Heels".

Anna: There you go.

Dr. Orenstein: There. Now I made a lot of friends. Yes.

Anna: Yes.

Dr. Orenstein: Thank you, Anna.

Anna: To find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com. That's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N solutions.com. Or you can call 919-968-8586 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. I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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