

Anna: Can a pet make or break your marriage? This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 252.

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. Pets can be a source of joy or a nightmare. Which kind of pet should you get, if any? How many are too many? Whose responsibility is it to take care of them?

These issues are fairly easy to work out on your own, but when you and your spouse disagree on these issues, it can cause a whole lot of trouble. Should you be responsible for cleaning up after the dog your wife had from before you were married? Are your husband's three cats driving you insane?

Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein. She is here to discuss how couples can come to an agreement on how to manage the pets they already have, and how to compromise on any desire for new furry friends.

Anna: Welcome to the show, Susan. I'm so glad you could join us.

Susan: It's my pleasure, Anna. Thank you.

Anna: How often do pet issues come up when you're counseling couples about their marriages?

Susan: I wouldn't say it comes up every day. It's certainly does come up at times when I'm working with couples, and also when I'm working with individuals who are frustrated with their relationships.

Anna: Okay. What are some of the big issues involving pets that you see that are causing problems between spouses or partners?

Susan: Let me back up, just to say I am a big animal lover. I think I can share lots of stories where clients and couples get pets, and they have a really valuable experience. There's research showing petting a dog can do so much to improve our mood and decrease the overall stress in a family. It can make people feel fantastic. You go out and walk the dog. You can't walk a cat. You get exercise that way. I just wanted to start by saying I'm going to talk about when things go wrong, but I want people to know that things can go really well.

Anna: Oh yeah. Of course.

Susan: I had to say that.

Anna: Of course. I totally agree. I think that they can be very important in a relationship too, in a sense; the pets.

Susan: Yes, it's something that couples can share. But when it goes bad, it can go really bad, because there's a third party. Like I said, I'm an animal lover. I'm a people lover, too. People and animals can get hurt when it goes bad. What I see when it goes bad is when the family has so much going on, that the pet gets neglected. They're not getting the medical treatment they need, or they're not getting walked. The dog can start acting out, just like we know kids act out when they don't get enough attention.

When dogs act out, they can bite kids. They can destroy the furniture. They can start peeing on the rug. They might bark all night and disrupt neighbors. It can cause a lot of conflict, not only in your family, but in your neighbor's family. I'm talking specifically about dogs because that is what I know. It would be really interesting to hear the ramifications of other pets as well.

I think when I see it going wrong is when there's too much going on and the animal gets neglected, and then there are these repercussions. And then I see the other extreme where one of the partners is so attached to the pet, and nurturing that pet so much that it's actually a person that's getting neglected. The other spouse can feel like their needs come after the cat or the dog.

Anna: Right.

Susan: So animal neglect and people neglect cause problems in relationships.

Anna: Right, yeah. How do you think people attempt to handle their differences, opinions, and desires surrounding pets, having pets, or not having pets...

Susan: What I've seen is it's similar to how couples handle conflict with other issues that they have to negotiate. It could be with children, with sex, with money. Sometimes people are not getting their needs met, get aggressive, make threats, or ultimatums, and try to force the person to see their point of view. That generally doesn't work. Other times, they just say, "this a deal breaker," and then the relationship doesn't work. I think when it's best, is when the couples, just like I said with any other issue, is when they can sit down and negotiate, and figure out a middle ground where both the adults in the relationship can be heard and figure out that path.

Anna: I'm curious about how people, say, if one person is a serious animal lover. They've always had pets their whole life, and they feel the need to have a pet, or something like that. And then, the other person has never had pets. They're not really as much of an animal person, and they don't want a pet, that kind of thing. I'm sure that can create tension. Do you think that it's a breaking point for some people? Can it be a breaking point?

Susan: It could be a breaking point, but I think that would show that the couple isn't able to compromise. We could be talking about somebody's love for golf, or somebody's passion for sci-fi movies, and the other partner doesn't like it. A really healthy couple will figure out a compromise.

I think sometimes it's a deal breaker. It's important if, let's say, for instance, if you're allergic to pets. A compromise there could be one person getting an allergy shot, or getting a dog that doesn't shed as much. There are still compromises. I think the deal breaker wouldn't be whether

there's a pet or not. I think the deal breaker is that you and your partner haven't figured out a way to compromise.

Anna: I see that. If you can't compromise on a pet, maybe you're not meant to be together in the long run anyway.

Susan: That's right. I think that's right.

Anna: Can a partner learn about the way their spouse will behave in other situations by observing how they are with pets, do you think?

Susan: I strongly believe that if you watch somebody with pets, just like if you watch somebody with small children, you can learn a lot about their character. You can tell how sensitive they are, and compassionate they are. You can see how they're going to be at setting limits. Just like setting limits with children, or setting limits with in laws, or anybody else. It's important to figure out how to set limits with your pets, so that they don't run the house. You can learn that by watching the person.

If your partner or somebody you're dating has a really hard time setting limits, and the dogs are barking, and they're really being passive about that, and letting them disrupt other people's lives; you can see that they're going to be passive about other things. If you see that they're obsessing about their dog, over one little thing, you're also learning how they're going to be handling stress. If you see when it's raining and it's cold out, and they're not going to let the dog in, and they're ignoring the howling, and the barking, and the whining. I think you can learn how sensitive they are to emotions, and other people's suffering.

Anna: I totally see that. I agree completely.

So then, what do you think the best way for a couple to approach getting a new pet, to make sure everyone's preferences are considered? What do you think the issues are that need to be discussed?

Susan: I think getting a new pet is such a big decision. I think you're right. It is important to discuss ahead of time, what the couple wants to do, and what the sacrifices are. Is it a dog or a puppy, that's going to need a lot more attention, or a lot more training? Is it going to be an older dog, that is more sedentary, and won't need as much? The couple needs to figure out what the animals needs are going to be, and then negotiate who's going to do what, and who's willing to do what ahead of time. What's so great now about adopting pets, is they can tell you so much about their temperament and their breed. I think the animal shelters are doing a much better job at trying to educate people before they take a dog home. They don't want people to take a dog home and have a miserable experience, and then have to bring it back.

Anna: Right.

Susan: Maybe, there should be like an, eHarmony for pets and people who are in couples...

Anna: [laughs] Oh my gosh, yeah, that's great.

Susan: Maybe, like a pet date or something where couples can speed date, in a dog park or something. That would be really fun.

Anna: I know. That would be adorable.

Susan: Then there are people, where both people are not animal lovers. I guess they wouldn't be listening to this podcast. They may be plant lovers, or wine tasters, or sushi lovers, and good for them.

Anna: To each his own, whatever is your cup of tea.

Susan: That's right.

Anna: So how do you think couples can reach a compromise on the big issues regarding pets, that are already in the house? Or a pet, say, that one partner had before the couple was married?

Susan: The best way to handle it is for both people to really sit down calmly and hear each other out. I have seen just remarkable things when couples have an issue, and it feels like they are at an impasse. I've actually seen this with couples talking about pet issues, where they get stuck, and they're talking over each other.

I walk them through a process and I teach them a process where they can really listen to the other person and understand their needs. That creates a space where compromise is much more likely. So where couples feel like they're really at a tug-of-war and there just isn't a compromise, there really can be, if they can get themselves in a place where they can be calm and respectful. It's fascinating. Honestly, I've seen it so many times.

What I would say to couples, if you're feeling like it's hopeless because your partner has one way of taking care of a pet, and you have such another way, it's really worth it to have a conversation in a different way. Possibly, going to a couple's therapist, or some kind of mediator, or somewhere where the issue can be discussed in a different way. I think people will be surprised at what kind of solutions they can come up with.

Anna: Well, Susan, any last little bits of information, or tips, or advice for our listeners?

Susan: I want to say that I am a dog lover. Everybody isn't. I didn't used to be one until I had one. It's just brought so much joy to our home, reducing the stress. But then again, it's a big, big commitment. I think it's a really important decision, not something to enter lightly. It's not always the best time to be getting a dog. It's not always the best time for a couple to bring in another being that needs care. It's something I would hope people will be really thoughtful about before they would bring in a pet into their family.

Anna: Definitely. Big responsibility, for sure.

Susan: Huge.

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

Susan: Oh, it was my pleasure. It was so much fun. Thank you, Anna.

Anna: As always, to find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com. I'll spell that for you. That's O-R-E-N-S-T-E-I-N solutions.com, or you can 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. 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.