

Anna: Dealing with change in your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married: Episode number 258.

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. How can you and your partner manage change throughout your marriage? Change is as inevitable as death and taxes, yet when people marry they don't think very much about all of the ways their partner might change over time.

Changes can come in many shapes and sizes and at various points throughout life. Changing career paths, religions, whether or not you want children, how you choose to spend or save money, the list goes on and on. Sometimes dealing with change can be very difficult and confusing and can also cause much stress on a marriage and both partners individually.

If couples aren't on the same page about how to manage different transformations throughout life, then they might argue more, which might lead to a buildup of resentment. There are solutions, however, and today's guest is here to share some of her tips and pointers.

Dr. Tina Lepage is the founder of Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Among others, a specialty of hers is personal and professional relationships. With more than fifteen years of experience serving clients, Tina has helped her fair share of couples dealing with many different issues. Welcome to the show, Tina. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Tina: Thanks. Thanks for having me back.

Anna: Of course. Let's start with the big thing about change. Why do you think that people get so worked up about it to begin with?

Tina: I think that it's funny because even though you're talking about how natural change is, I don't think people necessarily think all that much about it in relationship to, when they get married, that, wow, my partner might really change, sometimes in even some big ways. We kind of get into our daily routines and get used to how things are. Everybody's heard the saying, "change is hard", and so change comes along and we might not be all that prepared for it. We might not have even really thought about some of the ways in which our partner might change and then all of the various impacts that those changes can have on ourselves.

Anna: With people that you see, some couples and stuff, do you ever see some really big problems that come up that are associated with change?

Tina: Well, yeah. There are some changes that are bigger than others. Some of the big things that we've seen, just for example, let's say, is we might see a partner who has changed whether or not they want to have children. That's just a huge impact on a relationship. Sometimes people change their religions. That can be a huge impact on somebody's relationship. Those are really very big changes.

People might have the type of change that comes up that's going to have a really large impact on their partner in terms of either how they live their day-to-day life, where they live geographically, how they raise their children. It might really impact the way they think about their values and, "Am I living the type of life that I thought I was going to be living?" It can be pretty weighty stuff.

Anna: Definitely. Exactly what you're saying about thinking you're going to live a certain life and then having to live a different life. One of the examples that you used was deciding not to have children if you went into the marriage thinking that you did want to have children. That seems pretty big to me, how can partners cope with something like that, for instance?

Tina: We can jump in and talk about how they can cope with it, but oftentimes what happens initially is that there's just a lot of resentment. There really can be some deep seated anger and resentment that this person has imposed such a big change on their life and something that they can't necessarily control, either. Meaning like if you've changed whether or not you want to have children or not and now this other person doesn't want to, somebody might be thinking, "Wow. I've wasted all of these years. I would've married somebody else because that was a really important thing to me, to have children or to not have children."

Anna: Right. It seems like that might be something that not everything would be able to be fixed in that sense. What if someone does just really want to have children and they can't change that?

Tina: Right. Right. Or vice versa. We've had people agree to get married, saying they both agree that they don't want to have children. Then one person all of a sudden decides that they really do want to have children. How does that impact change if the other person doesn't come along with that change? Or if they do go along with that change, wow, that's a really different life all of a sudden if they had envisioned a life without children, and now all of a sudden they're going to be raising children in that one particular example that we're talking about.

Anna: Right. Right. If we're talking about these negative things that are associated with the big changes, what do you see happening between partners? We kind of touched on that, but what are some of the other things that you see besides the resentment?

Tina: It can be a really stressful time. Certainly there can be a lot of arguments. People can really pull apart and certainly not be as close to one another. People will sometimes try to talk things through. They might try to change the other person's mind sometimes just by saying, "This isn't fair. We had an agreement. We talked about these things before we got married."

Some of these can be some pretty gut-wrenching arguments and discussions that can go on between people. It can be a very tough time in a marriage. Really difficult conversations at best, and at worst some pretty massive arguments.

Anna: Right. How do you see partners trying to fix these issues on their own?

Tina: On their own they'll certainly try to talk about them. Sometimes one person will feel like they're "trying to talk sense into the other partner". Similarly there are people that will try to listen and wrap their head around it to try to see if it's a change that they could or couldn't get on board with. With some of these big things that have to do with religion, kids, and moving across the country and that kind of stuff, interestingly, people will oftentimes get their family and friends involved. Like, talk some sense into this person. Of course, if we got married and agreed that we were going to go to this church and raise our children in this way, of course we're going to do that.

They might even get their spouse's parents involved to try and talk some sense into him or her. Those are some of the things, I think, that people do on their own to try to deal with what they see as a problem. Of course, we're talking about change when a partner sees it as a problem. Sometimes change is terrific, and the partner can get excited about the change.

Anna: Right. If we're talking about how they might try to "talk some sense into the other", try to talk them out of doing this big change, or even getting other family members involved, what kind of consequences can a marriage face if one partner tries to do that?

Tina: Certainly one person can feel ganged-up on if somebody is employing too many other people, if there are too many hands in the pot somebody can certainly feel ganged-up on. You want to try to avoid that. There can be consequences in terms of if the fighting gets too intense. Obviously, the more intense the fights, the more harmful that is to a marriage. People can say things that are hard to take back and that are hard to get over and get past.

We certainly encourage people to use some other methods and try some other things. If they see themselves getting into this really extremely angry place around a potential change or feeling really a lot of resentment around it, that they try some other things and maybe get help at that point.

Anna: Right. What is your solution for resolving these kinds of problems for couples?

Tina: I think there are a variety of different steps and things that people can do as they approach this type of situation. Whatever type of change it is that your partner comes to you with, some things that we suggest, one is that try to take a deep breath and stay calm. Before you decide how you're going to ultimately feel about the change, because the initial thought might be, "I don't like this. This isn't what I signed up for."

Before going there, try to stay calm and really listen to your spouse's thoughts and feelings about why the change is important to them. That way your partner feels heard, and it gives you some time to really hear everything that's important to your partner, what's going on here, and really think it through. Is it as bad as you initially think?

Another thing that we suggest to people is a visualization of the change. Meaning that after you go through this listening phase, to really spend some time visualizing what life would be like with that change in place under the best of circumstances. For example, I've had a number of cases over the years where a partner wants to change jobs which sometimes can mean moving

geographically. Sometimes it can mean less money. That has an impact on a family if somebody says, "Gee, I want a re-career and now I'm going to be at the bottom of the totem pole again."

Anna: Right. Right.

Tina: Visualize, under the best of circumstances, what could this change look like? Really spend some time visualizing that. Maybe your initial thought is, "I don't want us to make less money." If you spend some time visualizing it you'd think, "But now maybe my partner would be in a career that they've always wanted to be in. Maybe they're going to have less stress. Maybe we're going to have more time together." Just really go through it in your brain and see what the positive picture would look like, and just imagine that.

Those are a couple of things. Another way is to try to separate changes that deeply impact you from changes that don't. One example of that might be, if we look at the religion one, if you set aside the issue of children. Let's say it's just that couples have shared the same religion, and now the partner wants to switch to a different religion. Think that through. Does that have to have a huge impact on you if that person is going to go to a different place to worship? Does that really have to have a huge impact on your day-to-day life? Or is that something that you can let happen, respect it, and not be too upset about?

Really separating out, in terms of the change, what parts of the change are really, truly going to impact me versus what parts of the change aren't really going to have a huge impact on me and maybe just have to do with a change in values or direction. That helps calm people down sometimes when they think about what impacts me versus what doesn't impact me.

As part of that process, of course, that we haven't talked about yet is then your voice being heard. Making sure that once you've done all that and are in a good frame of mind, trying to calmly share your thoughts and feelings with your spouse in a respectful way without anger, blaming because that never goes well. When people say, "This isn't what I signed up for," oftentimes what the other person will say is, "But did either of us really think that we were going to be the same person throughout our entire life? Of course, now I want to grow. I want to evolve as a person."

Anna: Yeah, yeah.

Tina: Trying to share your thoughts with your spouse and, hopefully having listened to your spouse, they're going to want to hear back what you have to say, what you're thinking and what you're feeling about the impact of this change on yourself, on the children if there are children, on your overall life and family. Talk about how it's going to impact me, and this is how I feel about that. Here are the fears and concerns that I have, et cetera, that whole thing.

Obviously, we're encouraging this slow, detailed, in depth, dialogue. Respectful, real dialogue about whatever the change is. Rather than get into a you versus me stance in the change, try to come at it from a place of sharing hopes, dreams, desires. When people are dating and getting married, that's what it all is. It's that excitement of, "Let's create a shared vision of our life."

Anna: Right. Like a team.

Tina: Yeah. It's a team. Exactly. That's the perfect word for it. It's like coming at it as a team of our life. Trying to come back to that and saying, "Now we're dialoguing. You want to change in these ways." Being able to go back to that shared, "How do we create a shared vision of our future?" Taking the data of what you both want, what you both hope, what you both fear, et cetera. And taking all that and working together to develop a life plan going forward. That is something that can help people get through this time.

One thing that I think can help people stay calm is to think about what would change and what would stay the same in that plan. Sometimes when change all of a sudden comes up and we weren't expecting it, one of the things that is really daunting about it is we start to think, "Oh my God, everything's going to change. I'm bumped out of my routine. My life's going to be different."

Anna: Right. "What am I going to do?"

Tina: Right. "What am I going to do? It's all going to change now." It can be calming to categorize it that way. "Okay. Here are the things that would change, but here are the things that still stay the same in this new plan." That can keep people calm. I think going through that whole process and finding that shared vision again is really key. Hopefully, when people do that and go through that whole process that I just described, they get to a good place with the change and are back to a supportive place in their marriage again. That's what we would hope for.

Sometimes these change issues are really highly charged issues. If people can't do what I just described without it being really highly charged, then they might want to use a marriage therapist along the way to help them facilitate those discussions if their discussions aren't going well on their own. People will have a sense of that, whether or not they really can do those discussions on their own or whether that's one of the times in their marriage that they need a little help.

Anna: Kind of like a mediator, sort of.

Tina: Yeah, because you know, things can get really heated when people are anxious and worried. That's what change brings up is that fear of, "Oh, oh. Things are going to be really different and what does this mean for me?"

Anna: Yeah. And I assume there can be a lot of emotion involved in those kinds of things, especially some of the changes that we've talked about. They get very, like you said, highly charged so that can be something that could be helpful for some people.

Tina: Yeah. They can get very highly charged, like child rearing. We haven't talked a lot about that in our examples, but people, sometimes before they have children, they really have these well-thought-out discussions about how we think we should raise our children. And then they have children, and they learn some things even along the way and, "Wow. I think I feel differently now about how we should raise children." But that doesn't mean the other person changed.

All of these things are important things for couples to talk about, be on the same page about, and can be really heated discussions if one person is changing in a direction that the other person really disagrees with. Or at least initially disagrees with.

Anna: Definitely. Right. Right. Well, Tina, is there anything else that we should know?

Tina: I don't think so. I think the big things are: if you're faced with a big change from your to try to stay calm, try to just take a deep breath and stay calm and listen and dialogue through it, and hopefully people can get to a place where both partners can feel like they come up as a team with something that works for the both of them. Sometimes these issues, which can be big issues, we might be talking about weeks and months of discussion to get to resolution on some of these issues. Other things it might just be a couple of days of discussion.

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

Tina: Sure.

Anna: To find out more about Tina and her practice, Lepage Associates, you can visit their website at www.lepageassociates.com or you can call 919-572-0000 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.

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