

Anna: Family Woes. This is "Stay Happily Married" episode number 259.

Recording: 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 do you do when you just can't stand to be around your in-laws? Although you love your spouse, you might not always love his or her parents or siblings. So, how do you make peace with them when there's always been tension? And how do you reach a compromise that everyone is okay with?

Naturally, the goal is to develop a comfortable roll for yourself with realistic expectations for what your in-laws can offer to you and what you can offer to them. It's not always that simple though. When there's a lack of support from the in-laws, it can put a lot of stress on a marriage and both partners individually. Sometimes couples don't really know how to set healthy boundaries and limits and they ultimately get caught up in never-ending family drama and turmoil.

Our guest today is Dr. Susan Orenstein, the director of Orenstein Solutions in Carrie. Susan has worked with many couples who have faced these very issues and she's here to discuss a way to fix the problems. According to her it is possible for couples to get to a place where they feel comfort and happiness with their in-laws, even after many years of struggle. Welcome to the show, Susan, I'm so glad you could join me.

Dr. Orenstein: My pleasure, Anna.

Anna: Always nice to have you on. Okay. So, where do you think that this drama, you know, people have issues with their family, their in-laws, where do you think that it starts in the first place?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, I think it's funny you use the word drama because you think of Shakespeare as one of the most famous plays as Romeo and Juliet and really that's about in-laws and family conflict. So this is as old as mankind.

Anna: Yeah, very true.

Dr. Orenstein: I think it just starts with human nature that when you have more than one person, and we all have distinct personalities and distinct values and upbringings and cultures that there's going to be disagreements and miscommunication and different expectations. So, conflict is inevitable.

Anna: Mm-hmm. I guess it's just a matter of how you end up dealing with the conflict that is what's most important.

Dr. Orenstein: Exactly.

Anna: All right, so do you think that maybe at first, a lot of people kind of bite their tongues with their in-laws because of maybe, like, a respect thing?

Dr. Orenstein: I do. Also, if you look at the age that a lot of people are getting... It depends on what age we're talking about, but generally with first marriages that's the case because it's often a young adult and their respect, sense of respect for the other generation. And there is a thing as being polite and respectful and I'm all for that. I think the danger happens when somebody's pretending to be somebody they're not to get along and go along and that really leads to a lot of unintended consequences.

Anna: Right, right. So that's, yes, good, that's what my next question was kind of about is; when might that change? That, that sense of, "I'm going to hold my tongue, I'm not going to say what I really feel because I know this is your family," but when does that, when do they reach a breaking point, really?

Dr. Orenstein: It depends on people's personality because there are just some people who are not going to put up with that for one minute but I would say, in general, it's easier to tolerate infrequent visits with in-laws and things until couples reach a developmental stage where they have their own children and their own family. And that often leads to higher stakes. And people feel it's time to speak up because the stakes are really high.

Anna: Right, right, and if we're talking about kind of speaking up, I think that would sort of fall in line with setting some healthy boundaries and limits. And if you're talking about when a couple starts to have children of their own; how important is it for them to start setting those boundaries and limits with their in-laws with regard to parenting the children?

Dr. Orenstein: It's crucial. Because if they don't set those limits then they're not being leaders of their own household. And you need to have leaders of a family and the family that they're creating. If they're not leaders with their own family then there's going to be chaos. The kids aren't going to have that sense of respect for this set of parents. So for every new family, the parents need to be the ones to take in charge and set the tone and be leaders for their own family life.

Anna: Right. If we're talking about the conflict side of things, just if there's a grandparent that maybe doesn't agree with their son or daughter in-law on how they're parenting, then I guess, that's a way that you might see some issues come up and what's the best way for the parent who is the in-law, who is the son or daughter-in-law, what's the best way for them to handle kind of the grandparent that doesn't agree with them? That doesn't agree with their choices, doesn't agree with how they choose to parent, what's the best way for them to go about handling that?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, some of what I'm going to say is simple or it sounds simple but it's incredibly difficult and that is to have direct communication and actually express what's bothering you to that person. And the reason it's so much harder than it sounds is I have seen again and again, people committed to having a conversation about, let's say, socks on the floor, but then it becomes too hard so then they start talking about ice cream flavors.

That's a weird example but basically, it's just incredible to me and so fascinating how hard it is for people to address the actual issue that's bothering them. And that's why

miscommunication is so common because, for instance, let's say, you're really frustrated with your, um, I've seen this, actually this would be an example that I've seen where a mother-in-law might be very frustrated that the daughter-in-law would call last-minute about childcare. And she would be resentful, but then calm, but possibly come late or possibly have a little bit of an attitude and never have the courage to be direct about that but might instead start criticizing something about the food that the mother is feeding the child. So that's where crazy-making comes in, because people are often arguing about things that aren't the real thing.

Anna: Right. So they're just bringing something else up when really they just need to address the issue that is something that's the root of the problem rather than beating around the bush, in a sense.

Dr. Orenstein: Exactly. Exactly.

Anna: So then what are some boundaries or limits that a couple can set for their in-laws or for their parents as far as their parenting choices go?

Dr. Orenstein: I believe the, probably the most important thing a couple needs to agree to and commit to is that they're going to discuss these things with each other, they're not going to turn outward and talk about each other or keep secrets with another family member and in-law. So, for instance, I think what could be really unhealthy is a couple might actually be having a disagreement about some parenting within themselves and then turn to their mother or their father and complain about the other person and kind of make these alliances or sides.

And so, I would say the number one boundary is that you agree that you're going to turn towards your husband or wife with your complaints, with your frustration, with your fears, with your excitement and not keep secrets or gossip or talk about them to a family member. So sometimes in the couple, we're our own worst enemies because we can create these sides and layer on really, go, 'Oh, my gosh, what did I create'?

Anna: Right, right. So in addition to kind of creating sides or doing that sort of thing what do you see couples doing on their own to try to change their situation?

Dr. Orenstein: In a positive way or in a negative way?

Anna: Well, to fix it if they have the drama that's going on. If they are dealing with their in-laws in a negative way.

Dr. Orenstein: Right.

Anna: Do you see, maybe, ultimatums, kind of? Or this or that sort of thing?

Dr. Orenstein: I see what you're getting at. Yes, so, another human phenomenon that I find fascinating and I fall into, myself, is that when the stakes are high and we're emotional, sometimes our solutions can create more problems. And so, sometimes when mistakes are high and couples are very upset about this relatives interference or comments, they will make extreme ultimatums and want emotional cutoff, maybe

say, "I'm not going to speak to them," or... so that is a boundary and that's an extreme boundary and I think that's often taking it too far.

I think what I would like couples to know is there are lots of boundaries you can set for yourself that don't have to be that extreme that... For instance, you could have a boundary that when, when an in-law comes that you will keep the cause to one or two minutes. Or you could say, "When we go and visit, we're going to leave at a certain time." So there are different ways couples can set boundaries that don't have to be these extreme cutoffs and I think people do these extreme cutoff boundaries because they just feel so desperate and they don't really know what to do and so, again, sometimes that leads to a whole other set of problems. Because if you have an extreme cutoff and say, "I'm not going to talk to you at all," and that creates a cold war.

Anna: Right. And you don't want that.

Dr. Orenstein: And that's very, very sad.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Right.

Dr. Orenstein: What I can also say is there are always exceptions to any of the things that I'm going to talk about today. Because I would say with any wisdom, the opposite can be true too and so I think there are times, there are extenuating circumstances where people may need that emotional cutoff and that extreme boundary. So what comes to mind, for instance, would be if there is any kind of danger to children, any kind of abuse, safety issues then by all means that's the number one concern.

Anna: Definitely. So ultimately, what is the main little bits of advice that you would give a couple to resolve these issues?

Dr. Orenstein: I would say, number one, for them to create a setting, them meaning the couple, to talk about the issue calmly. And if they can't find a way to do that, that's where couples counseling could be really useful. Because that's really a big part of my rule or other couple's therapists rules is to create an atmosphere of safety to get the couple to talk to each other and have some kind of clarity about what their boundaries are, what their limits are, what the issue is, so then when they're trying to communicate, they're not talking around something, they're talking about the issue. So for the couple to get clarity and to set limits would be the number one place to start and I think a really helpful piece.

Anna: Okay. Well, definitely, yeah. So is there anything else that we should know or any other little bits of advice or tips or pointers that you would have for couples when they're dealing with these things that are sometimes not so great, things that are causing them tension and family drama?

Dr. Orenstein: I would want couples to consider that there are some really good intentions, well-intentioned relatives that are misguided and it would be nice to give them the benefit of the doubt. And I see some of those people in my practice. So I see in-laws and grandparents scratching their head and saying, "Why did she yell at me about the

crumbs on the kitchen?'

In that case, I would say consider that in most cases these relatives are not monsters. They may be scratching their head too and they might even consider some kind of family counseling where they come in. Everybody would feel better if they could figure out a way to set these limits and have more fun together and relieve the tension so, if a couple can address this, they're not only doing themselves a favor, they're doing their kids a favor, they're doing their parents and in-laws a favor; you go to family reunions, you're doing a favor to all, both people because everybody can feel the effects of these family dramas.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Orenstein: So it's worth it to address these things.

Anna: Right. Because family is family and it's important to try to work those things out.

Dr. Orenstein: Mm-hmm. It is. And we still need a little drama because that's why we have these fun TV shows like most of them. Each get a little fun and entertaining, so kind of just tolerating a little bit of mishap and annoyance and making up can, isn't the worst thing in the world if you can figure out how to resolve the conflict before people get really hurt.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I think that's definitely the key. Well, Susan, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today, I really appreciate it.

Dr. Orenstein: Oh, it's my pleasure, Anna, as always, thank you.

Anna: To find out more about Susan and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.orensteinsolutions.com and 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'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, stay happily married.

Recording: 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.