

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Who's Taking the Initiative?

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by Rosen Law Firm. For more information visit us at Rosen.com.

This is Stay Happily Married for February 25, 2008, "Taking Initiative."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and health marriage.

Lee Rosen:

It's time for Stay Happily Married. I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. We're going to be talking about taking initiative in a relationship. This should be interesting. Welcome to the show.

Today's topic is taking initiative. It's interesting because in lots of marriages there really is some concern, some problem, with who is it that's initiating things, whether it's doing special little things for one another or initiating conversation. And we're very fortunate to have with us Dr. Tina Lepage who is a psychologist with a great deal of expertise in marriage counseling and helping people through these very issues.

Dr. Lepage is the founder of Lepage Associates Solution-Based Psychological Services; that's a full service psychology practice in southern Durham, North Carolina. And she has, from the very beginning of her career, been focusing on marriages and family. She's earned a B.S. degree in Child Development and Family Relationships, and then she got her doctorate in Clinical Psychology. She's a specialist in relationship issues and has been doing couples counseling for more than 10 years.

We're very fortunate to have her because she's not just someone who has been in the clinical situation helping people one-on-one, but she's also done a lot of workshops and seminars and even

trainings for other mental health professionals, so she truly is an expert's expert on these topics. So let's discuss this with Dr. Tina Lepage and see if we can't figure out some solutions to the taking initiative problem.

So, Dr. Lepage, it's really good that you were able to join us today. I very much appreciate that. How are you doing?

Dr. Tina Lepage: I'm doing great. It's great to be here.

Lee Rosen: I'm very interested in this topic because I'm married and my wife would have opinions, I think, about my sort of initiating conversation, initiating lots of things.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Right.

Lee Rosen: And is this a common problem?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Yeah. This is actually a very common problem in terms of what couples present with when they come to couples therapy. And I think even for those of us who are married, just in terms of general sitting around talking with couples you hear this come up in terms of husbands taking initiative. So I would say many, if not most, couples face this problem, both on the side of the wife's perception of the husband not taking initiative, and also sometimes the husband wanting to take initiative but not being quite sure what that means or how to solve that problem.

Lee Rosen: Well, isn't it hard for us to initiative much of anything because the women are always talking?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, Lee, I think women do like to talk -- that's right -- but it comes from being pretty relationally oriented and relationship oriented. And so, you're right. We try to talk to our husbands and get them to talk back and tell them what we need and what we're looking for.

Lee Rosen: And we feel like we want to talk. We want to know where's the remote.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Right. Well, that's a little bit of a different kind of a talking.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So we're looking for something deeper if we want to make our marriages work.

Dr. Tina Lepage: I think so, yeah.

Lee Rosen: What are the elements of the problem? Why might a wife be frustrated that her husband is not initiating?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, I think there are a couple things. One, first off, is just that the definition of the problem tends to be different. Meaning that the definition of "initiative" and how that's meaningful in a relationship tends to be different for men versus women. So, for example, men tend to look at big picture things, like that they are earning an income and working hard and supporting their family, that they love their wives, that they're faithful, those types of things; and so they see those as the important areas to take initiative. Whereas wives, when they're thinking and talking about taking initiative they tend to be talking about the day-to-day kind of things, more like helping with the household chores or paying the bills or planning a date night for the couple.

And so you're left with some disconnects in communication there, where they try to talk about this issue and the husband, for example, might be saying, "Well, of course I am somebody who takes initiative. I work hard. I support us." And the wife is looking at that and saying, "But you don't help with the dishes." And there's real disconnect there. They're both talking about something that's important, but essentially they're talking about a different topic. It doesn't mean that women don't really appreciate and respect those bigger picture kind of items, it just means that they're talking about something different when they ask about initiative from their husbands. So that's one element of the problem.

And the other element tends to be just that even husbands, as I mentioned, who really want to take initiative are often at a loss as to exactly how to jump in and what to do in a way that's going to be effective.

Lee Rosen: So, you're the expert; you help people through this all the time. Does your husband take initiative? Have you figured out how to make that work?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Is my husband going to listen to this podcast?

Lee Rosen: Are there really skills, ideas you can learn?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Yeah. I think there are definitely skills and ways that this can be done. And I would say certainly over the years my husband does take more initiative because we've instituted some things. First, we have a better understanding of what we're both talking about so we're clearer in our communication about what's being asked, and just specific in coming up with ideas as to what he can do.

Lee Rosen: So, are there certain kinds or certain types of couples for whom this whole situation might be worse than for others?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, certainly in some ways the busier your life the more this comes up because there are just more areas in which initiative needs to be taken; there's more to get done. And oftentimes busy lives impede on time that the couple might more naturally have together and so there has to be a little more planning around couples time, and so that area of initiating time for the couple tends to come up. So I think in those type of couples it comes up.

And then, of course, the better communicators you are, the better you are at working this type of problem out.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So have you seen husbands -- people like me -- that have made efforts, we've made attempts, but it doesn't work?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Sure. Sure. And usually that's because of a couple of things. One is that men often times, when they get excited about, "Okay, I'm going to show initiative and I'm going to make my wife happy," they often times will go to grand gestures. And grand gestures are wonderful, but they're just not sustainable.

And so examples of that might be where a husband says, "Okay, I'm going to take more initiative for our couple time together," and so he plans a really wonderful, terrific, romantic evening for the two of them.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Tina Lepage: And that's great, but he can't plan such a big, elaborate thing every week and so it's not really sustainable.

A similar example might be around household chores where the husband says, "Okay, I'm going to take this Saturday and I'm going to clean the house top to bottom." And again, that's terrific. Most wives would appreciate that, but it's probably not sustainable.

And so grand gestures is one place where husbands sort of jump in, they're very enthusiastic, but it misses the mark because it's not sustainable.

Lee Rosen: So let me make a note of that. I don't need to try grand gestures anymore.

Dr. Tina Lepage: No, no, you can do them. They're appreciated, but they're sort of occasional uplifting things in a relationship, but they don't meet that mark of initiative that's going to be sustainable that you can do on a regular basis.

Lee Rosen: The other thing that occurs to me as you're talking is sometimes I've said to my wife, "Well, just tell me what you want me to do."

Dr. Tina Lepage: Right. Right.

Lee Rosen: And that doesn't seem to work either. What's the deal there? It's like, "If that's what you want, just tell me. I'll do it."

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, hopefully sometimes that will work, because that's sometimes another place where husbands don't do as well is they don't ask that question. So if you're asking that question, that's really a great place to start. Often times husbands will just jump in and say, "Okay, I'm going to initiate more," but they won't clarify what their wife exactly -- what areas she would like them to initiate in. And then they're putting forth a lot of effort and they're kind of missing the mark because they didn't check in with her as to how she would most like them to initiate. So that's actually a good place to start if you're starting there.

Now, of course we all know there are times in couples' communication where you might go forward and ask your wife something like that and she might say, "You should know. Why would you be asking?" If she does that -- trying to be sort of empathetic of her stance -- that type of response usually means she's experiencing a certain level of frustration. So trying to let her know that, well, even if maybe you "should know," you'd like a little direction so that you can put some initiatives in place that will make her happy.

Lee Rosen: So on a really practical level, if we're talking about -- not doing the grand gestures. So what I'm hearing from you is it's okay to check in with her and see what she wants, but help me with what other strategies do work.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, I think that most women think of initiative in two broad areas. And so if you're sort of planning an approach to this problem, let's say, as a husband, you can start there in your mind that typically the wife is looking for initiative in some of the practical day-to-day household items; and she's also typically looking for initiative in terms of the relationship, so things like planning time together, asking how her day was, initiating conversation, giving her a

shoulder rub if she said she had a difficult day, those types of relationship-based initiations.

And so if you kind of take it from there and say to yourself, "All right, I can pick a couple of things in each of these areas that are sustainable, that are things I can do regularly, that I've checked in with her and she's said would be helpful to her," and then you can sort of start there. And a good suggestion is to pick one or two things to start and then implement those for a while; because whenever you're implementing a change if you're over-exuberant and you try and put too many things on your plate all at once, then you end up not really being able to follow through on those. So pick one or two things and put those in place and go from there.

Lee Rosen: Am I going to get into trouble if I'm really overt about this? So I've asked -- let's say it's "do the dishes." I've checked with her and she's like, "Yeah, I really would like you to do the dishes," and so I start doing the dishes every night. And I have a checklist and it's sitting in my bathroom because I'm not that good at remembering things.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Sure.

Lee Rosen: So is she going to feel like I'm treating her like I have a formula or a system and I'm going to get in trouble for making her a part of my checklist?

Dr. Tina Lepage: You know, that's an interesting question and I think the answer is different based on those two different areas we're talking about. Wives are probably perfectly happy if you have a checklist of chores around the house that you do and you the checklist gets you to do those. If you have a checklist of things that say, "Remember to ask your wife how her day was," she might feel like that's a little bit unemotional.

Lee Rosen: Maybe. But at least I would be asking about the day, right? I mean, I should get points for trying.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, you should. And you know, a lot of us have these types of reminders to ourselves, and if you don't have it in such an obvious place that might be a good idea for something like that.

Lee Rosen: Maybe leave the note in my car. Right. That would help.

Okay. Now, people come to you. Do they identify the failure to take initiative as the problem when they come in, or do you have to kind of read between the lines and figure out that that's the issue for the couple?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, it always depends on the couple, how much insight they have when they come in to the problems that are going on in their relationship. But I would say in general wives are pretty clear about the lack of initiative and their feelings about that when they come in.

Lee Rosen: Have they already told the husband, "This is a big problem"?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Again, typically I'd say yes when people are the point they're presenting for therapy only because most people try to work those things out between themselves before they bring a therapist into the mix.

Lee Rosen: Do you feel like if all of us had some training in this -- the guys -- if we had a meeting before we were allowed to be married, or something, and we knew "just have this list and do these things," would that really cut into the number of people that you're having to help with their marriages? Is this a pretty big piece of the puzzle?

Dr. Tina Lepage: I think it is, more so on the side of understanding the importance of it. And I think one of the great skills people can develop in marriage to really help them have a happy marriage is the skill of just accepting something as important to the other person, even if you can't even begin to understand why it would be important. So, for example in this, men might not be able to understand why it's so important that they put the dishes in the dishwasher or -- why are those things so important to the woman and she seems to read a lot into them in terms of the relationship, etc.? But, versus having to understand it, just respecting that it's important to my spouse, it's meaningful to my spouse, and then acting on it, that really is just a loving gesture that shows that you're trying to make your spouse happy. And so a list would certainly help, but more so it's understanding the meaning.

Lee Rosen: And so I guess if it's all about the meaning hiring a housekeeper probably wouldn't be a good solution. You really need to do your own thing. You need to be showing that you mean it.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, actually, I think that showing that you mean it on a lot of things is great. But I always say to couples, "If you can afford to hire a housekeeper, it's a great marriage saver." So it just takes --

Lee Rosen: Okay. So hire a housekeeper and then do some of these things.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Hire a housekeeper and then do the things that are left over.

Lee Rosen: Right. If we keep going we're not going to need marriage counselors anymore.

Now, I know you've met with lots of people and you talk about these issues and you walk them through and they do it. I mean, I'm sure you see people that follow your advice.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: So what happens when they start following your advice on these -- husbands to start initiating and stepping up to the plate in the way that you're describing?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Yeah. Well, that's really the most rewarding part of the work is seeing couples become basically happy with each other again. And what you tend to see in that example is that both people have an increase in satisfaction. The wife feels heard and understood and respected. The husband tends to feel effective and appreciated. And so both people generally feel a lot better about one another and are pretty happy at that point.

Lee Rosen: That's great. Now are there other things that we should know on this topic that we really need to -- things we should be filled in on so that we don't go out and mess this up?

Dr. Tina Lepage: I think maybe just keeping in mind how important some of this "small daily stuff" can be, because really our interactions as a married couple take place around a lot of this small, day-to-day stuff, and so all of these things are an opportunity to increase communication and to become closer to your partner.

Lee Rosen: Well, Dr. Tina Lepage, I very much appreciate you giving us this advice. I think some of it I'll be able to take home and put to work. So thanks so much for being with us today.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Thank you, Lee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

Lee Rosen: A special thank you to Dr. Tina Lepage for joining us today and for guiding us through these issues of taking initiative. I certainly feel like I've learned a lot and I've got some practice tips -- practical advice, really -- that I can go home and use right away that I hope will make a difference in my life, and I especially hope that it will make a difference in yours.

You can learn more about Dr. Lepage by visiting her website at LepageAssociates.com where they have a lot of very interesting

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resources that I think will also help you as you're working your way through these marital issues.

Thank you so much for joining us and we hope to see you again next week.

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