

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.



## Building an Us

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

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. We're going to be talking about building an Us. This should be interesting. Welcome to the show.

I'm here with Lesli Doares. Did I pronounce that right, Leslie?

Lesli Doares: Yes, you did.

Lee Rosen: And Lesli is a licensed marriage and family therapist who practices in the Cary, North Carolina area. Lesli is known as an author, a speaker, a seminar leader. She has a bachelors degree in psychology from Stanford, I'm impressed by that; and a masters in psychology from the Georgia Institute of Technology, also impressive. Lesli's practice is in Cary. It's called Balanced Family and it focuses on helping couples build strong, secure relationships. She's not only a qualified professional, but she has 20 years of marriage experience with her husband, in addition to having two children.

Welcome, Lesli. Thanks for being on the show today.

Lesli Doares: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee Rosen: So you're married and you have two children. How old are your kids?

Lesli Doares: My son is 15, he's a freshman in high school; and my daughter is 12, she's in 6th grade.

Lee Rosen: And 20 years of marriage. That's pretty impressive in this day and age.

Lesli Doares: Well, it's actually been a whole lot of fun most of the time.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's good. I will tell you in my role as a divorce attorney I don't hear a lot of people say that. I'm happy to hear that.

Lesli Doares: Well, I got very lucky and found a wonderful man and he seems to think I'm okay too.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me ask you -- this episode of Stay Happily Married is called "Building an Us." I assume you're seeing a lot of couples that don't really have an Us.

Lesli Doares: Absolutely. I think that's one of the major challenges to being married is how you take two individuals who are used to doing their own thing in their own time and then building something that is much more lasting and much more us/we focused.

Lee Rosen: Now, are these folks -- are they people that are living sort of separate lives in the same home?

Lesli Doares: Not necessarily. Sometimes it's just more -- it's that squeaky wheel gets the grease kind of thing that people spend a lot of time courting, going through the process, trying to find a partner, and then when they find the partner it's kind of like, "Okay, we can take a deep breath now." And then life kind of interferes. People have jobs, they have children, and they kind of tend to forget that a marriage requires attention.

Sometimes people are living separate lives. Sometimes they do get on that track. But a lot of times it's more everything else kind of ends up higher up on the list and then it's like, "Oh, yeah, wait. I've got a partner here."

Lee Rosen: Right. So when they're thinking about what's next it's really not thoughts about the marriage; it's thoughts about I guess the to-do list of all the logistics of day-to-day life.

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: So these people, they're coming and seeing you. Do they even know that that's what's missing, or are they arguing and fighting and just in meltdown with no idea where it's coming from?

Lesli Doares: It's actually both. A lot of times people will come to me kind of as a first step before they come to you because they really don't want to be divorced but they just kind of get into this idea that either the

relationship is going to stay the same because it's been this way for however long, or divorce is the only other option. But they really don't want to do that so they go to a counselor to say, "Okay, help us out here."

Sometimes they have gotten into antagonistic fighting kind of things just because they're so unhappy. And other times there may be something that's happened. Maybe somebody's lost a job or they want to move or the kids are getting older or there's some event where suddenly they realize, "Wow, I really feel like I'm alone in all of this, even though there's this person who's in my life," but they're not really there as a support system.

Lee Rosen: Right. So they're feeling lonely in the marriage and I guess they're coming to you as a last resort. It's like, "We need to fix this or we're not going to be able to make this work."

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: Now, is this the bulk of your practice? Is this the bulk of what you do day in and day out?

Lesli Doares: Pretty much. I have couples really trying to make it work but they really don't know how. There's really no really good instruction manual. It's like when you get married it doesn't come with "plug in here" or "turn this switch;" you just kind of are struggling. And because it's a relatively natural thing, everybody thinks they should know how to do it.

Lee Rosen: I'm really curious, so you're seeing these people and I'm sure you're seeing a lot of folks if you're doing this all the time. When they come to you and you give them -- and I want to hear specifically how you help them out, but does it work? Are they able to go back into the world and be finished with the counseling and make the marriage survive?

Lesli Doares: That's my goal. My goal is to give them the tools to where they can do this without me.

Lee Rosen: But can they?

Lesli Doares: Yes.

Lee Rosen: It's a pretty optimistic, pretty high success rate?

Lesli Doares: A lot of it has to do with how willing the people are to do the work. The more they're willing to say, "I want this relationship to work. I'm going

to really be open to alternative views," then they can be highly successful.

Lee Rosen: Right. So they come to you and they're clearly in trouble. What have they already tried to do? I'm sure that if you're sort of the last resort, have they tried things that didn't work?

Lesli Doares: Absolutely. A lot of what happens is they start focusing on the things that are wrong with the relationship, and a lot of times they focus on what their partner is doing.

Lee Rosen: It's always somebody else's fault, right?

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: That's my system.

Lesli Doares: Well, and it's a pretty natural system because if I can get somebody else to do something different and I can continue doing whatever it is I'm doing exactly the same way, it's much easier for me. It's a lot harder for me to take a look at it and say, "I'm not really happy with what's going on. What can I do to make it better?"

Lee Rosen: So that's fairly common that we're blaming others and we really have to figure out what we have to do. Do you give them specific advice how to go from where they are to where they want to be?

Lesli Doares: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: What sort of things do you tell people?

Lesli Doares: Well, one of the first things is that I try to get people to focus on what's been working. If somebody's been married for 10, 15 years -- even 3 years -- there's something that they've been doing that's positive. But negatives are so powerful that they grab all the attention and we kind of forget, "Oh, wait a minute. There's this whole other aspect of our lives that's actually working." So I try to get them to focus on what's working.

Lee Rosen: That makes sense. When something bad happens it does stick in your memory, I think, for a long time; and when something good happens, it's sort of fleeting, it's in and it's out. And there are so many good things that happen every day but we just don't pay very much attention to them. So you get them focused on the positive, on the good things, which I guess makes people realize that there's something here worth saving.

Lesli Doares: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: What other things do you have them work on? What else do they do?

Lesli Doares: Well, another thing that I have them work on is to identify very clearly what it is that they would like to be different in the relationship, and then have them look at that and say, "Okay, this is what I want to be different," and then, "This is what I can do to help make it that way."

Lee Rosen: Do you usually get both spouses -- do they get pretty engaged in all this?

Lesli Doares: Sometimes they do. A lot of people want the direction. They want to know, "How do we make this work? What are the tools that we can do to make it work?"

And so if somebody is willing to sit down with them and say, "Here, this is step one. Do step one and then we'll get to step two," they're pretty open to it.

Lee Rosen: And so they come -- I guess this is probably most typically a weekly kind of meeting?

Lesli Doares: I generally see my clients every other week, one, because I did give them homework; and two, because I don't want this process to be more stressful. People say, "Oh, I didn't do my homework. I don't want to go to therapy today." It's like, "No, it's okay. It's really okay."

Lee Rosen: And so what's typical -- let's say you come and you've kind of gotten a few weeks of your input. What's typical timeframe for sort of getting things headed in the right direction? Because I have this vision of every meeting being this kind of screaming at one another, reporting in to you what she did wrong last week and how awful it was.

Lesli Doares: Well, I try to get them off of that because, again, that's not productive. We can't undo whatever's happened in the past. We kind of have to come to a state of acceptance and forgiveness and then start new behaviors.

Lee Rosen: Right. And does it take long to get away from those bad behaviors?

Lesli Doares: It can. A lot of it depends on how willing people are to actually look at their part in what's been keeping the conflict or the unhappiness going.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you're really trying to take people from being kind of this -- living these sort of separate lives and you're trying to get them to build what you describe as an Us, which I think is a good way to look at it.

And so you're walking us through the steps you take to have them head in that direct. What else goes on?

Lesli Doares: Well, one of the first things that I try to get the couples to do is to identify what their own needs are, because we all have needs. Sometimes we know what they are; sometimes we don't really have any idea. And I specify needs versus wants because needs are non-negotiable. Getting them met is non-negotiable; how we get them met is. But the fact that we actually need these certain things in our lives aren't negotiable. So then it gives the couples a starting point to talk with each other about the things that they need to feel whole and healthy and happy as individuals, and then they can start to build those needs. Each individual's needs become part of the needs of the Us.

Lee Rosen: So now we're starting to see how everybody's coming together as we move through the process.

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: Where does it go from there?

Lesli Doares: Well, once we get their needs established, then we start working about how those needs get met within the sense of the couple. And part of that is being committed to the relationship, that you're going to say, "Okay, I'm not going to walk away from this relationship," which means everything therefore can then be talked about and addressed.

Lee Rosen: Right. We're talking away the sort of nuclear destruction threat, I guess. We're kind of recommitting to the relationship?

Lesli Doares: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And from there, where do we go?

Lesli Doares: And then it's forming a team. It's you're working together towards a goal. When you get the needs of each of the individuals, then you can sort of start building this idea of what do we together want this relationship to look like? And we start working as a team towards that. And pretty much every decision that we make on a daily basis is kind of done within that context of, "Is this good for the Us? Is this moving Us in the direction we want to go?"

Lee Rosen: Right. So you almost are visualizing this new being, this new Us, and you're paying attention to it and tending to it and making sure that it's successful.

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: Cool. I really like that model. That's a really good way of thinking about it. Now, as you build the Us are there new things like, I don't know, traditions or rituals that need to be a part of keeping the Us working?

Lesli Doares: Absolutely. Like I said before, it takes -- I call it a relationship takes attention and intention. You need to actively do things that strengthen the relationship and those can be rituals such as how do you leave each other in the morning? Is there a set way? Do you make sure that you kiss your partner or do you make sure you say, "Have a great day?" Or something that is a good-bye ritual. And then how do you come back together at the end of the day?

Or do you have a phone conversation some time during the day? Do you say, "Okay, we always talk to each other at noon," or "we meet for lunch three days a week," or something that -- there are daily rituals and then there can be special occasion rituals. The one that I really like is John and Elizabeth Edwards still spend their anniversary at Wendy's.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right.

Lesli Doares: That's something that keeps them in contact with each other, with their past, it's just something that's part of who they are as a couple.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, I've read about that and that is very interesting. Even though it's Wendy's it become a very special thing in their relationship; that's interesting.

Lesli Doares: It has meaning for them.

Lee Rosen: Right. So when we look at this kind of big picture in your practice, from the day someone comes in for their first meeting -- when the couple shows up -- through sort of getting things back on track where they feel like, "We just don't need to keep going and getting the counseling anymore," give us a range. What is that time-wise like?

Lesli Doares: Well, it can be as short as maybe six to eight sessions.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Lesli Doares: Yeah. It can be really, really quick if, one, if there's not a lot of damage. That's where the time factor comes into it a lot is because you have to be able to heal from the damage before you can start this process, which is kind of why I like to get people in early before there's a lot of damage that needs to be undone.

Lee Rosen: Right. Because you're just burning your bridges and you're going to have to go back and rebuild them and that's going to take much longer if you've gotten to that point, I suppose.

Lesli Doares: Right.

Lee Rosen: And so do you have people that take years of coming to see you to get things back on track, or do they give up before they get to that point?

Lesli Doares: Generally I haven't had a couple with me for that length of time. I have worked with some individuals for that length of time, but usually if they really buy into this concept of the Us then it's generally not more than 15, maybe 20 sessions.

Lee Rosen: Right. So, you know, it's funny because I feel like when we get married we're committing to an Us. And then I guess things happen, life happens, and we forget about the Us. Then you're there helping to remind us to get back to paying attention to Us.

Lesli Doares: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: It's a lot of uses of the word "us" there, but it works. Are there other things that we ought to know about the idea of building an Us?

Lesli Doares: Well, one of the things is that a lot of times we get caught up in the idea of "what isn't happening for me" or "how my partner isn't meeting my needs," and we get very me focused. Whereas if we immediately turn it around and start thinking about "how can I help out my partner," it changes how we're focusing on things. And if we can do it with a willing spirit and an open heart then it creates this absolutely wonderful sense of togetherness because it's so much easier to do something for and with somebody else who's doing things for and with you.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's a whole different way of looking at things than the way you might have looked at it when you walked in for your first session.

Lesli Doares: Right. And one of the most dangerous things that happens is couples end up in competition. I had a young couple come in once and the young man said, "Well, if I do what my wife wants, she wins."

And I'm thinking, "Hmm, this is going to be a little difficult." Because it was you versus me, as opposed to us together.

Lee Rosen: Right. And really if you do what she wants, you win as well.

Lesli Doares: Right. That was kind of my thing. It's like, "You don't want a happy wife?" But, okay.



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Lee Rosen: Right. And were you successful with that couple?

Lesli Doares: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Good. Good.

Lesli Doares: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Well, Leslie, thank you so much for being here today. I really appreciate you joining us. Thanks so much. I certainly feel like we've learned a lot about building a transition, working on building an Us.

A special thank you to Lesli Doares for being with us today to teach us all about building an Us in our relationships. You can learn more about Lesli by visiting her website at [BalancedFamily.com](http://BalancedFamily.com).

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you will join us again next week.

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