

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

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.



## When Your Spouse has a Problem with Substance Abuse

*This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 9, "When Your Spouse has a Problem with Substance Abuse."*

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

*Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at [Rosen.com](http://Rosen.com).*

---

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here with Erin Langdon. Erin is on the phone and she is a licensed clinical addiction specialist who practices with University Psychological Associates in Charlotte, North Carolina. Erin holds a Master's degree in counseling from Appalachian State University and is currently working on her Ph.D. in counseling from the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. Erin is also a certified clinical supervisor and has worked with substance abuse agencies and treatment centers for eight years now.

Welcome to the show, Erin. I'm glad you were able to join us.

Erin Langdon: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, it is a great day in North Carolina to talk about substance abuse, which I guess is something that it seems like everyone either has a family member or a close -- I mean, it's pretty prevalent that we're dealing with in our society, isn't it?

Erin Langdon: Yes, it is.

Lee Rosen: Do you see substance abuse having a significant impact on marriages?

Erin Langdon: Absolutely. And I'm not sure substance abuse discriminates. It seems to affect all individuals from all backgrounds and all economic status, and certainly all relationships.

Lee Rosen: Kind of across the board everywhere you turn. This is a problem that touches every kind of family everywhere we go.

Erin Langdon: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Well, what is it like to live in a family where there is a substance abuse problem? What does that look like? What does that feel like for most people?

Erin Langdon: Well, I think that's probably different depending on the degree of substance abuse that's happening for the individual. So substance abuse occurs in stages ranging anywhere from experimentation to sort of regular or risky use, up to dependence and addiction. Then, depending on where that individual is, it might look slightly different for each family.

So for a family member who is physically addicted to a drug, then for those other family members to witness sort of what that person's going through may be very different than for somebody who's experimenting. Or the functional alcoholic who is going to work every day and coming home and just -- there might be a sense of misery for that person, but it may not affect in the same way as someone who is physically addicted to a drug.

Lee Rosen: Do people usually know that it's a substance abuse problem by the time they come and see you, or are they still trying to figure out what's wrong with this picture?

Erin Langdon: Well, I would say both of those. Sometimes people who come to see me have been told maybe by work or by a spouse that if they don't stop using drugs or alcohol then those relationships are no longer going to be there for them. So that person may be planning on leaving the marriage or it may be a work situation where there's been some disciplinary action and they may end up losing their job. And in those cases a lot of times the folks are acknowledging that there's a problem and that it's something they want to work on. Whereas in other cases where the use is sometimes pretty regular but it's kind of that slippery slope and that person's not quite into the full-fledged addiction, then in those cases most of the time the folks don't necessarily see that their alcohol or drug use is a problem.

Lee Rosen: Are there times where the marriage is just such a mess that people don't even realize this is what's at the root of it?

Erin Langdon: Correct. And so usually, typically, they don't realize that. Then that sort of perpetuates the problem because they'll sort of put a band-aid on all the other things, whether it's the kids or the work or the time they spend together, and it's kind of like seeing that bubble gum on the dam; it's going to hold it for a few seconds, but the same problems are going to cycle back through if the substance abuse is not addressed.

Lee Rosen: Now, when people come to you are they often coming together as a couple, or is it usually one spouse or the other?

Erin Langdon: When they're coming to see me, typically I'm seeing the individual, and sometimes it's at the urging of the other spouse. And the other spouse is certainly available either by phone or sometimes if I request it, they will come in. But typically the person coming in is the person with the substance abuse. My specialty is not couple's work and so that may be different for someone who's a couple's therapist.

Lee Rosen: Right. But you might get a referral from the couple's counselor that they've been seeing. Is that a fairly common scenario?

Erin Langdon: Yes. And a lot of times couple's therapists -- and it's not the same for each therapist -- but sometimes they won't do too much counseling with the couples, or couple's work, until the person with the substance disorder has sort of gotten help for themselves, moved on a path in that direction, because it's hard to address a lot of the problems within the marriage if this other problem is not being addressed.

Lee Rosen: I was going to ask you that. Is substance abuse really a deal breaker? Can a marriage just not work if you have this untreated substance abuse problem?

Erin Langdon: I don't know that that's true. It seems that if it's going to work there's going to certainly be a level of denial that all the people are going to be in. The problem comes when one person sees it as a problem and another person doesn't. So when there's that kind of awareness or that kind of dissention going on then, yeah, it can be very difficult. But some people have certainly remained in relationships where somebody has a problem with alcohol or drugs for the entire marriage. Usually to do that there's a level of denial that has to be present.

Lee Rosen: I'm just a lawyer, so I don't understand all the issues. But the denial would have to be huge, I would think, if this marriage were to stay together. Eventually it would just seem like it would drag the people down.

Erin Langdon: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Now, when people do come in to see you is it typical that one spouse is sort of saying -- the sober spouse -- are they saying, "These things must happen before this relationship can go on"?

Erin Langdon: That's what's being relayed quite a bit. And when I worked at the substance abuse treatment agencies then sometimes in those cases folks were coming in more than just once a week individually; they were coming in for group therapy three and four times a week. And usually one of those nights of group therapy was actually a multi-family group where all the family members of all the group members would come in together, and a lot of times those family members would talk about the anger and the distrust that they feel. And so in those situations then -- I'm not sure if this addresses your question or not -- sometimes in those situations the family members would have a lot more contact and involvement.

Lee Rosen: Now, are people trying to solve these problems on their own without seeing a professional? Are there things that they're doing that work or that don't work?

Erin Langdon: I think they are. Sometimes their first step might be, okay, I'm not going to use during the week. I'm only going to drink or I'm only going to smoke marijuana, or whatever it is, on the weekend. And sometimes that works for a little while and they'll notice that they have more energy or that they have a lot more mood swings in the week than they used to have, but then over time those mood swings get better. And they start to see maybe a positive shift from that.

And then sometimes what happens, though, is they get a major stressor in their life and the first thing they may want to do is go drink or pick up or use, and sometimes that use ends up picking back up over the years and they're back to using during the week. It's not usually immediate, but it's like, maybe I'll use on the weekends and just on Wednesday night. And then it sort of picks up.

Other things they might try to do, some folks don't go to treatment at all and they go to AA or NA and they work a recovery program and they get a sponsor and they never need any formal treatment. Their treatment has been their AA services and their fine with it.

Lee Rosen: When you say "formal," you mean with a professional. But that's a pretty structured program they're putting people through, right?

Erin Langdon: It's an excellent program. There's no counselor present -- and they don't have a counselor, they have a sponsor, but it has had a lot of success in all countries in the world.

Lee Rosen: Well, let's say you have either a drug or an alcohol problem. Are there stats that tell us what the odds are that you can deal with this without AA or without a professional? Are some of these people successful or are the odds pretty slim?

Erin Langdon: I don't know the stats. I'm sure they're out there, but I would say that the research definitely shows that the success of AA and NA and 12-step program and combining that -- most treatment providers, one of their recommendations is always to follow-up, in addition to treatment, some sort of AA and NA 12-step program.

So I don't know what the specific numbers would be, but there are some people who are able to stay sober without going to AA and NA and without working any sort of program, but a lot of times their other behaviors don't change. And AA and NA and the steps that folks go through in that program requires a lot of self-examination and changing how they deal with any sort of anger or stress or anything else, and that doesn't always happen when somebody just stops.

Lee Rosen: Right. So if you were making recommendations to people -- someone is listening and they really want to either address this problem themselves or they have a spouse that they want to have work on it, what are the best actions? What are the best steps?

Erin Langdon: Well, I think resources is always the key, and this can come in a lot of different ways. Some people those resources at their church, some through counselors, some through substance abuse treatment agencies, some by going to these 12-step meetings, and I think all of those are good directions to start in. So if they find a counselor that has a specialty in substance abuse, or at least knows of the resources out there for treatment, then that's a good start.

Some people find that information in other ways, too. Al-Anon is a wonderful place for family members of alcoholics and addicts because there are going to be other people there that are dealing with the exact same things that they're dealing with as a family member of somebody who's an alcoholic or an addict and they can point them in some direction of the things they can do to sort of

step away the chaos that comes with that. And of course, AA for folks who are using, or NA.

Lee Rosen: So if I'm the spouse of a drug or alcohol abuser, should I be going to Al-Anon even if my spouse won't go to AA or NA?

Erin Langdon: Yes. Yes, that's definitely one of the steps to take. And I think individual counseling for the spouse is always very helpful as well because there's so many dynamics that occur. For instance, if somebody's using and the spouse ends up picking up the slack in other ways; if the other spouse is not able to take care of the house or their job or other things, then it just creates such a skewed viewpoint that sometimes getting that additional perspective is very helpful.

Lee Rosen: Is it usually the person with the addiction or the spouse in the marriage that takes the first step, do you think?

Erin Langdon: I think a lot of times it's simultaneous. Typically -- and of course my end has not been couple's therapy -- but typically my end has been where the individual with the addiction, their spouse is saying, "I'm leaving if you don't make some changes." And then that person will take a step.

But a lot of times it takes the spouse a lot longer to come into counseling because they view all their problems are due to this other person's use. And so they feel like if the other person stops using then all the problems in their marriage are going to go away. And it tends to be a little bit more involved than that because they've certainly been present in that marriage as well and it's usually not all about that.

Lee Rosen: So if I'm the spouse of the person with the addiction do I need to wait until I get to the point where I have to say, "Either do something about this or I'm leaving," or can I be proactive and fix it before we reach that breaking point?

Erin Langdon: I think if the spouse is no longer in denial and they see that there's a problem, then they can certainly step forward at any time to use some of those other resources, take a look at that; but they certainly can't control whether or not the person who's using will see those same things the same way. And that's sort of what Al-Anon does is helps take some of the responsibility off their shoulders to keep everything going, which is kind of what happens every time. They start taking on a lot of responsibility that's not theirs and so I think they can certainly be responsible for themselves and whether or not

they want to go get help, but they are not responsible for the other person.

Lee Rosen: So this delivery of an ultimatum -- "work on this, go get help, or I've got to be out of here" -- that sounds like a pretty effective strategy of at least making something happen. True?

Erin Langdon: I think it tends to be more of a catalyst for making things happen. I wouldn't say that it works for everybody that way. There's plenty of times where people would say that. The folks that actually are coming for help, usually the relationships have been hurt in order for them to decide to make a change. But there are plenty of people who have given that as an ultimatum and the person said okay. I wouldn't say that it's actually a prescription for that; it's just the people that I've been seeing, that's been the catalyst.

Lee Rosen: Right. So if I'm listening to this program and I have this spouse with an addiction, what I want to do -- just so we're both on the same page -- is I want to go and I want to talk to someone like you and you may very well suggest that I also go and start attending Al-Anon meetings. That's sort of this two phase approach we're going to take to deal with this, yes?

Erin Langdon: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And are you hopeful, are you optimistic, can these marriages work out? Can they be saved? Is there much of a chance that getting the counseling, going to Al-Anon, that we're going to be able to make something happen and make this marriage work out?

Erin Langdon: Absolutely. Because what happens is after the person does get clean and they do start work in a program, then often the sober spouse will come back and say, "I feel like I have my husband or my wife back -- this person that I married, this person that I know." Sure there's things we're still dealing with, but it's just amazing the personality differences in this person whenever they're not using. And I think that gives couples a lot of hope that things can be worked out when they see such a dramatic change.

Lee Rosen: That's good. And I'm glad because I know that you probably work in an environment where it would be easy to be pessimistic and negative, but it sounds like you're seeing enough positive outcomes for people that you're able to really know that there's hope for people. And that's pretty important, I think.

Erin Langdon: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: I'll bet when people do get their spouses back that's a pretty great achievement for the family and for you as a professional. You have a chance to see that; that must feel really good.

Erin Langdon: Oh, it is. It's very uplifting and there's just a lot of good things that can happen when people get clean. And I think because there's a lot more that's openly talked about with alcohol and addiction in society in general, whether it's in the movies or in the media and that sort of thing, so rarely do couples see it as the end of the world for somebody to go and get treatment for alcoholism or addiction. They see it as that's just got to be a starting point for them to make some changes.

Lee Rosen: Do a large percentage of people end up going into these sort of residential 30, 60, 90 day kinds of programs that you're dealing with?

Erin Langdon: I think there's less of that. There's still a great deal of it. The problem is really managed care when it comes to that, or that can be one of the problems. And the financial.

Lee Rosen: Right. Must be very expensive.

Erin Langdon: It can be very expensive. And there certainly are some wonderful programs that are not. But a lot of times other forms of therapy are just as effective, like an IOP -- intensive outpatient program -- so that they come in three and four times a week, three hours at a time, and they can maintain their job and they can maintain contact with people. The folks that really benefit from residential are folks that really want to be out of the environment they're in for 30 days to get a solid break. And so that can be a wonderful thing, it's just not always a luxury everyone has.

Lee Rosen: Do you think it's any harder on a marriage when someone goes away to one of those 30-day programs versus dealing with it at home where everyone is still a player in the game?

Erin Langdon: I think sometimes it's a relief if tensions are really high to have that break, and then they find that they can regroup -- I guess a little emotional distance. But at the same time it can be really challenging, especially if there's children in the home and there's one parent to take care of several children, where before there were two. So either way --

Lee Rosen: Pros and cons of different approaches, right. Very interesting. Well, are there other things that someone who is really struggling with this, whether it's the person who is suffering from the addiction or



someone who is married to them, are there other tips that you'd like to give to people?

Erin Langdon: I think it's one of those things where it's a stepping stone situation, and just to know that the change is not overnight, that it's something that happens slowly and through putting other things in place. And, easy to say, but patience.

Lee Rosen: Patience, yeah. So if I'm someone, I'm living down in Charlotte -- and obviously your practice is in Charlotte -- and I'm suffering from an alcohol addiction, for instance, and I come in to see you, on average how long am I looking at from the day I decide I really need help to the day I feel like this problem is under control? Are we talking months, years? What does it look like?

Erin Langdon: The feeling like it's under control?

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Erin Langdon: I think that if it's on that scale of full-fledged addiction and dependence and that's the scale -- sort of the end we're talking about -- then what they're going to hear at Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, that this is a lifelong thing. It's just for today. So the focus is on each day as it comes.

The rules of thumb in terms of making major changes in their lives - - and this is something that comes from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous -- is to wait one year of being clean before making any major changes in relationships or jobs unless those things are harmful to their recovery and being clean. So there's usually don't make any major changes within a year; but in terms of when things are going to be better, usually a lifelong thing that has to be worked at.

Now, if it's regular or risky use, that could look much different. It really depends on what they're using and how it's interacting with the body and the brain and what sort of chemical things are going on as well.

I'm sorry. There's really no exact answer, but it just may not be that it's going to be a year before they can even consider making changes. It may be different.

Lee Rosen: Right. I guess so many variations in terms of what an individual situation can be that it really is tough to know how it's going to end up and how you're going to work through it all.

Erin Langdon: Yes.

Lee Rosen: But it seems very clear to me listening to you that I need to talk to someone like you and it's likely that after you talk to me you're going to be heading me either to AA as part of my plan, or NA, or Al-Anon, or potentially one of these treatment facilities. But really it sounds like you're sort of the doorway into getting help is to sit down with someone like you who's got years of experience of dealing with folks that have been through this before.

I really appreciate you being with us today. I feel like these are some of the toughest problems that marriages deal with and knowing where to go and where to start will make it a lot easier to find solutions. So thank you so much for being with us, Erin.

Erin Langdon: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee Rosen: A special thank you to Erin Langdon for working with us today and talking with us on this topic of what to do when your spouse has a problem with substance abuse. And you can reach Erin Langdon -- she has a website -- at [www.universitypsychologicalassociates.com](http://www.universitypsychologicalassociates.com). I will of course put a link to that site in the show notes.

I'd like to thank you for joining us today and I hope that all of you will join us again next week.

By the way, we would love to hear your comments. We have a listener comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. Or feel free to e-mail us your comments to [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). We'll talk to you so much. Thank you so much.

---

*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](http://stayhappilymarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com) or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.*