

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.



What I Learned About Marriage from Being a Divorce Coach

This is Stay Happily Married, Episode 14, "What I Learned About Marriage from Being a Divorce Coach."

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.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here with Jennifer Coleman, a life transition coach with the Rosen Law Firm, who helps clients set goals and priorities for their life after divorce. Jennifer has been helping folks for about three years dealing with their divorces and I think we will find that she has learned a fair amount about how to stay married from those folks that she's dealing with that are experiencing divorce.

Jennifer Coleman, welcome to the show.

Jennifer Coleman: Thank you very much, Lee.

Lee Rosen: How are you doing today?

Jennifer Coleman: Fantastic.

Lee Rosen: Good. Now, just to give people some insight into who they're talking with, I want -- you're married, right?

Jennifer Coleman: That's correct.

Lee Rosen: How long have you been married?

Jennifer Coleman: Let's see. I think it's 12, going on 13 years.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So a good long time. And I know you just had a second child, so you have two kids. Number two is, what, just a month old or so?

Jennifer Coleman: That's right; a couple of months.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Now, I would assume that you've learned a lot about marriage from your job at Rosen, yes?

Jennifer Coleman: That is very true.

Lee Rosen: Before we dig into what you've learned, what is it that you do? How do you help people going through divorce? What kind of work are you doing?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, we ask people in the ideal situation if they could imagine their life two years after the separation/divorce is completed, what do they want that life to look like in the ideal scenario? And then we help the person set priorities and goals for how to reach that kind of a life. So we're looking for a best case outcome, trying to transform what's usually a very painful process into a growth process and ultimately a better life situation.

Lee Rosen: Now, you are hearing a lot of stories from people that are just separated, and I assume they're explaining to you why they think their marriage didn't work out.

Jennifer Coleman: That's correct. We do hear a lot of those stories of what went wrong; too little too late. A lot of times people are in the very midst of trying to make sense of what happened and also figure out what went wrong where.

Lee Rosen: Now, are there things that you're doing differently -- you've been married, what did you say, 13 years?

Jennifer Coleman: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Are there things now that you do differently in your marriage because of what you've learned helping all these people that are getting divorced?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I hope that I'm a lot more aware of how things are in my marriage. I think that in any relationship you're going to have ups and downs. And people may not always know to expect that, that there will be periods of boredom and periods of passion and periods when you feel very close and periods where you feel a bit more

distant. And I think that those patterns are natural, but being aware of them and knowing when you've been bored for too long or when you haven't felt that connectedness in several days, that it's a good time to check in with your spouse and see how they're feeling and what's going on and what it would take to get that back again.

Lee Rosen: Do you see people that are doing things, trying to make their marriages work, that are sort of common things that people do that just don't work?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I can definitely tell you one thing that I've seen that seems to not work for most people -- and I don't know how common it is, but I've seen it several times; in fact, to me an amazing number of times. And that is when people become bored in their marriage -- and sometimes it might be a midlife crisis -- and they think, "Let's spice things up. Let's introduce somebody else into this relationship," usually in a sexual way. People who are, well, you want to call them swingers.

And you would be amazed; I've seen that several times and rarely does that seem to work out, or at least I'm not on the end of seeing that work out since we're working with divorce clients. But what's amazing is that generally the person who's getting divorced is shocked that this is happening because really they just wanted some more excitement. They just wanted what they thought would be an enrichment to their marriage relationship actually ends up with a lot of jealousies or their former spouse decides they really are attracted to this other person and that often comes as a shock to the person whose idea it was.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Okay. So the whole swinging thing doesn't necessarily help out a marriage. That doesn't actually surprise me, but it disappoints me.

Jennifer Coleman: It seems like common sense. Right.

Lee Rosen: But, you know, too bad. But, now, in that scenario is it more often the husband or the wife that comes up with this plan?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, in my experience working directly with clients often -- this may sound stereotypical, but often you see a male who wants to live out that dream, that ideal "wow" experience and it kind of backfires. And they're very surprised that their wife would actually be attracted to someone else because that wasn't really their idea in the beginning.

Lee Rosen: Right. So the bringing an extra person into the bedroom is not the way to go if you want to stay married.

Jennifer Coleman: Probably not a relationship saver. If you're feeling bored or that your sex life is just not exciting enough, a healthier suggestion might be to actually go to a marriage counselor or just talk to your spouse about how to spice it up between the two of you; because it definitely is an important issue, but sometimes people attempt to solve that in ways that just aren't helpful for a long-term relationship.

Lee Rosen: And you see this all the time. It sounds like it's a fairly common scenario that it leads to the end of a marriage.

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I have to say that in three years I've seen it several times, yes.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. Now, the thing that I hear people talk about all the time in explaining the success of their marriage is that they communicate well. Do you see a lot of folks that really aren't communicating? Is that a common theme among people that are not able to make their marriages work?

Jennifer Coleman: Exactly. I think regardless of the presenting issues that it comes down to that people kind of agree about or that cause destructiveness in their marriage, the root of that almost always has to do with communication. And the previous example I gave you may apply to a very small percentage of the population, but communication I would say 100 percent across the board applies to anyone at the breakdown of their marriage that something has broken down in communication.

Lee Rosen: So as long as you're communicating about things over than bringing a third party into your marriage --

Jennifer Coleman: I think the key is that you need to know what your spouse is thinking and feeling. You need to have some idea of what's going on with them and how that relates to what you're thinking and feeling. So it might have to do with any kind of issue that you need to come to an agreement about how you're going to raise your kids or how you're going to handle discipline or what you want to eat for dinner. But really understanding not only what they're saying but where they're coming from, why they feel the way they do, because you need to know those things to reach compromises. And you need to be aware of how you feel fits with the other person's goal.

Lee Rosen: That makes a lot of sense. Now, let me ask you this. You've been married 13 years. I've been married now 18 years. Is there a point at

which you're sort of immunized against divorce? Are you safe once you've dealt with this for so many years?

Jennifer Coleman: You know, I'd like to think so but I think the truth might be probably not, because when we let down our guard -- I do think that you reach a place of comfort with your spouse where things are just comfortable and feel safe and secure, you don't really think about things, and you take it for granted that that person is always there for you. And that's a really nice place to be in a relationship, but I think even then you still have to be on guard as far as keeping it alive and not just taking for granted that it will always be that way because relationships take a lot of work and they take upkeep and management.

Lee Rosen: So the good news is we're never safe. We have to keep working at it all along.

Jennifer Coleman: Right.

Lee Rosen: That was said with some sarcasm. Right. So after 18 years what I need to do is keep communicating and keep working on the marriage. Great. I was looking for a break.

Jennifer Coleman: I think most people are and that's the problem. The hardest thing I think in a relationship is true compromise, that once you know what the other person is thinking that you still have to be able to reach some middle ground on all kinds of issues -- finances, kids, parenting, how much time to spend together, how much time to spend apart. And I think that we probably get better at compromising as your relationship grows older because you're used to it; it's not so hard.

But one danger sign that I see and that people talk about a lot when they're divorcing is that one person or the other started to act like a single person. And by that I don't mean hanging out in bars, although that probably also wouldn't be a great idea -- making decisions that aren't joint decisions that aren't in the other person's best interest.

Lee Rosen: Are you saying that some people have -- that that's the case from the beginning of the marriage, or do some people shift at some point in the marriage and start acting like single people?

Jennifer Coleman: Right. I've seen a lot of times there's definitely a shift. If it's from the beginning, then I would say that marriage is probably not going to last a very long time. But often times there is some kind of a shift; a person just decides that it's too much work to compromise, or too

much work to put it out there on the table, or for whatever reason they're not comfortable having long intimate discussions with their spouse or exposing their feelings. And so they simply start making decisions on their own that the other person's either unaware of or doesn't agree with, and that usually leads to trouble.

Lee Rosen: Do you think that the people that you're seeing, that it's possible even at that point -- they've obviously come and talked to divorce lawyers and so they're way down the road. Are there interventions that might save some of those marriages, or by the time they've got to that point are they just too far gone?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, certainly I think that any relationship is salvageable if both people are interested in salvaging the relationship. And by "interested," I mean they are motivated to find out what it would take for both of them to feel content, happy, satisfied in the relationship and then make the changes to make that happen. If that exists, the relationship is always salvageable; but often times at the point that one person has consulted a divorce lawyer then that person needs to ask themselves some serious questions about what is wrong.

"What do I feel most dissatisfied about? What would have to change for me to feel satisfied? And what would that require from the other person and myself? How dedicated am I to making that happen and how strongly do I believe that that the other person has that same dedication?"

Lee Rosen: Right. And I guess many times by the time they've talked to lawyers at least one person has said, "I'm done and I'm not willing to even consider working on this."

Jennifer Coleman: Sadly enough, that's often the truth.

Lee Rosen: If you are listening to this and you're thinking, "We're in trouble" -- and I think a lot of people that are listening are in trouble and the last thing they want to do is end up in your office talking about dealing with a divorce. What would you put your energy into? What direction would you go and what would you do if you really wanted to save your marriage?

Jennifer Coleman: You mean that person themselves or as a counselor?

Lee Rosen: I mean the person themselves. What would my action steps be? I mean, I'm a guy; we always want to take action. What the heck do we do?

Jennifer Coleman: Well, I would say first of all, sit down with your spouse if it feels safe and express what you're thinking, that it's just not right, and where did things go wrong, and that you're concerned and you wonder if they're feeling the same way. How satisfied are they and how long have they been feeling that way? And you could really sit down and make a plan of action steps together. Basically you're looking for where is the dissatisfaction, what would it take to change that, what would that require of each of us, and are we willing to do it?

So you could do that through a marriage counselor or you could do it on your own. The problem is that most people, if they're able to sit down and have open and honest communication like that on their own, their marriage really wouldn't be in trouble to start with.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Jennifer Coleman: So that's why oftentimes we do refer people for marriage counseling, just because having a third party to lead you through those steps without tearing each other apart can be helpful.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's a real catch-22. If you were able to work on the marriage, you wouldn't be in this situation in the first place, for many people. That's very difficult.

Jennifer Coleman: Right. And that is exactly the point that I would make as far as in the beginning when you said, "What have you learned from this?" One thing I've learned, other than just being aware, is be proactive. Even when your marriage feels really stable there are always little things we can do to improve our relationship. No relationship is ever perfect. It might be close to ideal, you might be really happy with it, but none of us as individuals -- I would attempt to say -- are ever perfect in the way that we act with other people.

And so if you can be proactive, maybe you check in with a marriage counselor once every six months or you take a weekend away together just with your spouse to do nothing but hang out. Those things are really important to rejuvenate a marriage. And sometimes we think about working to save a marriage, but the real way to do that is to simply always be aware and be proactive instead of waiting until you wonder who is this person that you're married to anymore?

Lee Rosen: Right. Keeping the car filled up with gas rather than waiting for the tank to run out before you fill it up.

Jennifer Coleman: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Do you ever have people that sit down to have these conversations about "how can we work it out" and the other spouse had no idea that there was even a problem in the marriage?

Jennifer Coleman: Yes. That is more common than I would like to admit. I would say probably 60 to 70 percent of the time one partner seems shocked that this is happening. And, in fact, one person is really going through the process of separating 10 steps ahead of the other person because they've already kind of grieved the loss of the relationship and admitted to themselves that it's over before they talked to the other person about it. Or the other person just wasn't hearing what they were saying which came maybe across as a lot of complaining or nagging.

And so it's amazing how many times one partners is clueless, and that's really hard because they're beginning the grief process, grieving that relationship loss, or even just the shock of facing there is a potential loss happening, when the other person is kind of decided and gone on.

Lee Rosen: When you're talking to people that are going through divorce, do they often see those places where they could have taken a different path when they're talking to you and looking back at things?

Jennifer Coleman: Right. Hindsight is 20/20 and I would say that part of working through the loss of the relationship -- part of the grief process -- is trying to make sense of what happened. And so very commonly people will start to see, "If only I had done this. If only the other person had done that." And really working through all the if's and but's and should's and things that are in the past that now are seen clearly.

Lee Rosen: Right. And at that point there's just not a lot that can be done, unfortunately. But if people are listening now, if someone is listening to us right now, it sounds like they have an opportunity to really change the course of the relationship and make things work, as long as they really focus on communicating and being proactive about the marriage.

Jennifer Coleman: That's right. Definitely.

Lee Rosen: I would imagine doing what you do it's easy to become pessimistic.

Jennifer Coleman: Even cynical at romance, right.

Lee Rosen: But are you optimistic -- when they talk about a 50 percent divorce rate, so obviously some people are making it but a lot of people are

not. Do you believe that people can figure out ways to make this work and that we don't need to have a 50 percent divorce rate? Or are we headed to the point where some day it's a 60 or 70 percent divorce rate? Are you an optimist or a pessimist on this?

Jennifer Coleman: I'm definitely an optimist on that issue. And I think it's all about awareness, people being aware of what's going on in their marriage and just education about that it is normal for ups and downs in any relationship. And really it comes back to the things we've been talking about, the willingness to compromise and the ability to communicate openly everyday. And I think that you go through stages in a relationship when either one or both people can be very tired or unmotivated for whatever reason.

You have kids, you have more kids, and the energy that used to be devoted to one relationship and your normal working day tasks are now split in a hundred directions and it feels like there's less energy to devote to that primary relationship. But the marriage relationship is really the rock that the rest of the family is built upon and I think that we have to remember that.

When you have kids, of course they're important, of course they're going to be your number one priority as a parent; but you have to keep the marriage relationship first. The kids look to that for a model of how to relate and you need it for your own health and sanity.

So sometimes it can be a real struggle to keep the energy, to keep reinvesting in that. And when you do, sometimes there's that rejuvenation like when you go for a run and you're so tired and then you hit that runner's high. It's kind of like that in an intimate relationship I think because it takes a lot of energy to remember to give back to your spouse on a daily basis, but it can be really rewarding when you have a lifelong partner to share things with.

Lee Rosen: Well, Jennifer, it's really exciting to me to listen to you talk. You have a unique perspective that most people aren't able to have, because you're having this chance to see all of these folks that have really tried and failed and then they're spending all this time analyzing how things went and where they went wrong. So I think you're learning things that very few others in your profession have a chance to see in quite the way that you see it. So I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

Jennifer Coleman: Well, thank you. I feel very lucky to do this work.

Lee Rosen:

Well, we are very lucky to have gained the insights that you have. I hope that you are able to listen to what Jennifer has offered and put some of that to work in your marriage. I think there is some awfully good advice there that if you choose to be proactive and work on the relationship, work on the communication, that you really can be that person who did change the direction of the marriage and get it back on track; rather than being that person that has to sit down with Jennifer and work on the divorce.

If you'd like to learn more about Jennifer -- and hopefully you don't want to learn more about Jennifer because you're being successful at making the marriage work -- there is information about her at the Rosen.com website. I hope that you've gained something today and that this has been helpful.

If you have comments about this show we have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. We would love to hear from you. Or feel free to e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. In the meantime, until next time, stay happily married. Thanks for joining us.

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 e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.