

Stephanie: Real life Hollywood romance. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 269.

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

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Movies are made for our entertainment, but are they the key to a real life Hollywood romance? Authors like Jane Austen were setting unrealistic expectations of romance and breaking hearts all over the globe as early as the 18th century. Should it really come as any surprise that present day romantic comedies are doing the exact same thing in continuing the standard?

Movies offer an escape from the daily routine and drama of life, and they feed our imagination with whimsical images and romantic tales. The glamorous illusion that Hollywood creates can be shattered a little too quickly when we check back into reality.

Life isn't always as it is in the movies, but wouldn't it be great if it could be? Whether it's a say anything boom box by your window or a surprise visit at work ala "An Officer and a Gentleman," movies not only hold a high standard for romance and romantic gestures, but they can serve themselves up as an instruction guide to navigating love in the real world.

Professor of family medicine at UNC's School of Medicine, as well as Director of Behavioral Medicine at Carolina Medical Center, Dr. Matthew Alexander is a psychologist and founder of Alexander Therapy in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Alexander specializes in clinical, health, and family psychology, giving him a really strong background in family systems, psychodynamic, and interpersonal approaches to mental health.

Dr. Alexander has been published in multiple journals and is the lead editor and author of "Cinemeducation" detailing the use of cinema as a teaching tool. Dr. Alexander primarily treats couples in his private practice, but he is also available for public presentations on a variety of topics related to relationships. He is our perfectly suited guest for today's episode.

Welcome to the show, Matthew. I'm really glad you could join us today.

Matthew: It's a pleasure to be here with you.

Stephanie: You're the expert on all of this. Let's get the record straight because I think we get a lot of mixed messages. Are movies good, or are they a bad influence when applied to our own lives?

Matthew: Actually, they're both. I can't imagine a world without movies because they inspire, they provide magic, and they provide escape. It can be very bonding for couples to go to a movie together and talk about it afterwards. What I find is specific scenes from movies can be very illuminating for us.

The downside of movies is they can promote unrealistic expectations about coupling that can lead to disappointment, distress, and really, in some cases, even divorce.

Stephanie: So I guess that would be one of those misconceptions about the movies that it's not always as it appears.

Matthew: Yeah.

Stephanie: Are there any other misconceptions?

Matthew: That's a very good question. I think there are several. One is the misconception that love will solve everything. Another is that the best way to pick a mate is based on their looks. Love at first sight is a very common theme in movies that leads to this misconception. Sometimes, that that's the best marker of success. Also, of course, there's the idea that there's always a happy ending. Unfortunately, in life there's not always a happy ending.

Stephanie: This is not something I think people like to hear very often.

Matthew: Well, yeah, there are happy endings. We can do our best to make them as positive as possible. Actually, some movies are getting more realistic about relationships. These are not the blockbusters. These are not "An Officer and a Gentleman." But there have been several excellent movies about real relationships. One is a movie called "Hope Springs."

Stephanie: Oh, yes.

Matthew: Others are "The Story of Us" and "Blue Valentine."

Stephanie: Oh.

Matthew: These are excellent movies that deal with real life issues in an entertaining way, but because they don't match the stereotype they are not big blockbusters.

Stephanie: What issues are couples having where the movies, at least, the movies that they're thinking of as these kind of idyllic type where everything's happy and the animals sing type movies, in which movies can't help resolve the issues?

Matthew: Often, it's when people feel stuck in a relationship, they're not making movement forward, they're lonely, or if they've had an affair. Many of the couples that have seen me come to me after an infidelity is found out. It's very troubling for them to go to movies because movies often have themes of infidelity, but rarely do they show the couple working it out. That's another aspect that we don't really tend to learn from movies. In general, we don't learn about what to do after you say "I do."

Stephanie: Yes, I'd say that's one of the biggest issues, I guess, and one of the things that happens that could potentially lead to the divorce.

Matthew: Right. Right.

Stephanie: These issues are left unresolved or they're being handled incorrectly with these bad examples. What are the negative effects, and what effect do they have on the relationship?

Matthew: One of the blind spots people have about relationships is that the most important aspect of the relationship is whether you feel securely attached to your partner. There was a great movie about 15 years ago called "Castaway" with Tom Hanks in which he plays somebody that was isolated on an island without any human companionship. He's so in need of attachment that he creates a character out of a soccer ball by painting a face on it.

When couples are having problems with their attachment and they don't feel securely connected to their partner, they tend to do one of two things. They can protest and get really upset and angry, or they can withdraw. Sometimes they protest, and if that gets them nowhere then they withdraw.

There's a wonderful movie called "The Story of Us" that starts out with a couple sitting across from each other in a restaurant not speaking at all. It's the couple that we're all afraid we'll become. She flashes back to all the arguments that they had that led to no resolution, so she says the only thing left is silence.

I think that's one of the negative effects when issues are left unresolved. People become very distant from each other. Another thing I find that people do is they reach out to friends or family who will take their side and encourage further estrangement. This theme was brilliantly explored in a movie called "The Break-Up." I recommend that.

Stephanie: That one's always a favorite.

Matthew: Yeah, that's a great movie. Another theme from "The Break-Up" - you may remember this - is when they're fighting about the dishes. They try to fix the problem by doing the dishes after all their company has left.

The more they fight the worse it gets, because they throw in the kitchen sink to a ridiculous degree. It gets so bad that she asks him to leave. She doesn't really want him to leave, but the only way she knows how to communicate her attachment need is to take it to the extreme hoping he'll say, "Oh my God I'm so sorry. I don't want to leave. I'm so sorry I hurt you. Of course I'll do the dishes."

I think the more people try to fix the problem in marriage sometimes the worse it gets as communication gets confused with attack. Finally, it's as if the poor couples become very disconnected. Often in the couples I see who have had affairs it was because of this disconnection.

Stephanie: Oh. So the disconnection tends to happen before the affair.

Matthew: Exactly. I always tell people conflict is contact, and if you're not in productive conflict you become very isolated. Then, you're susceptible to an affair.

For example, a wife may say to herself he never listens to me. I've asked him to listen to me. He doesn't listen to me. I guess it's hopeless. Then she finds somebody at work, or someone finds her, that says I find you fascinating. I could listen to you all day. Then, you've got the setup for the infidelity.

Stephanie: Oh, okay. So left to their own resources, as well as their interpretations from these movies, I think that Jennifer Aniston...

Matthew: Yes, Exactly.

Stephanie: ...example there where I'll all play hard to get, and they'll come after me. We all hope...

Matthew: Right. Right.

Stephanie: ...that was the way the world worked. But left to their own interpretations of these films, what do you see couples doing on their own when they are trying to resolve their problems?

Matthew: They often use the same maladaptive communication patterns. This is like being lost in the woods. I have been lost in the woods, so I know what it's like. I finally got out, but I was lucky. What you tend to do is you go around in a circle, and each time you get more and more anxious and desperate. You can't really see your way out of the woods until a guide comes along and says you take two rights, a third left, then go straight and you're out of the woods. Without that, couples often get in these maladaptive communication patterns where they respond to each other and escalate rather than getting to the heart of it.

Another unfortunate aspect of what couples do when they try to resolve their own problems based on their interpretation of films is they'll have affairs to deal with loneliness and being stuck. The Julia Roberts movie, which I never saw but I'd like to see, "Eat, Pray, Love" has been called the ultimate divorce movie.

Stephanie: Wow. Really.

Matthew: Yes, because it shows Julia Roberts being unhappy in her relationship. She decides to travel the world, and she falls in love with somebody else. It makes it seem that the only solution here is to get divorced and find the perfect mate. Of course, we bring our problems to the next mate. So it's better to try to work it out with the mate that we have, if at all possible.

Stephanie: I think that movie, if I'm remembering correctly, the person that she fled from was the person she was dating after her divorce that wasn't working out. So I guess that just further proves your...

Matthew: Very good pattern, very good pickup of that pattern.

Stephanie: Yeah. So, I think this topic is relatable. That's the whole reason we watch movies. We attach to some character within the film, and that's just the basis of its mass appeal. That's why it's, I guess, the biggest medium out there.

Matthew: Yes.

Stephanie: How exactly can these movie clips assist in resolving the relationship issues in a productive way, something that's not going to get in trouble or create more issues like we've listed?

Matthew: One of the things that movies are good at is they can highlight some of these gender differences between male and female. Particularly, there comes to mind one that was very powerful. It's a movie that's out right now called "Don Jon." It's about a guy that's addicted to pornography on the Internet.

In the course of the movie, I don't want to give away the ending, but you see him move from objectified sex to relationship sex. That's a very powerful message for men that the best sexual relationships are based on a real knowledge of the other person and their vulnerability.

There are also some very important skill sets that clips can show. One of my favorites is a clip from the movie "Pretty Woman" which I found randomly by flipping through channels. It just happened to be the clip that was showing at that time.

In this segment of the movie Richard Gere apologizes to Julia Roberts in what I would call a compassionate apology. His tone is consistent with what he's apologizing for. He names the offense. He tells her what was going on inside of him. He's vulnerable. Then, he promises that it won't happen again. She forgives him.

Stephanie: I think I've been waiting for someone to prescribe that my entire life, that all men should learn and be more like Richard Gere. That's what I've been waiting for. Now I can move on.

Matthew: Well, yeah, you absolutely have it. You have it. Actually, this is a big problem with couples. Both men and women complain that their partner doesn't apologize.

Stephanie: I think that segues into my next question here. One of the most obvious signs that there's turbulence in a relationship is this fighting. What could cinema teach us about the anger that results from the constant bickering like you'd see in "The Break-Up?"

Matthew: That's a great question because I watched that clip where she wants him to want to do the dishes so many times. What happens if you watch this clip is they escalate and they start flooding. Flooding is a term used for the physiological response to threat.

What you start doing when you're threatened is you start defending and attacking which provokes a counterattack. So before you know it, this couple that starts to talk about a fight about dishes becomes a fight about everything in their relationship.

What's interesting about this movie is later in the movie there's a scene in which they have split up, but they're trying to get back together again. It's a major misunderstanding. He comes into her bedroom and says, "I'm so sorry". She talks again about the dishes. He says if I had known the dishes were that important to you I would've done them.

When people are in this agitated, flooded state you're literally unable to speak in a compassionate way. So, the best thing couples can do is to take a break, get away from each other for a while, then come back and talk about the fight behind the fight. She's feeling overwhelmed. He's feeling overwhelmed. He feels attacked by her, so he attacks back. They need to talk on that level so they can repair the relationship.

Stephanie: I think that's exactly opposite of what people assume they want.

Matthew: Yes.

Stephanie: They assume they have to get all their feelings out right at that minute while they're feeling them, and I guess they're not communicating exactly as...

Matthew: That is so true. It's a brain hijacking because the brain says, no, this is really important. People confuse feelings with attack. The culprit here is the conjunction "like." I feel like you never listen to me. Well, you never listen to me is not a feeling. It's an attack. People are unable to really talk about feelings when they're flooded.

So it's good to take a break, but it's work because you're right, you think I've got to get this out right now. My survival's at stake, but it isn't. It will pass, then you'll realize that it's just dishes.

Stephanie: And in these movies you'll have some leading man like Vince Vaughn there.

Matthew: Yes.

Stephanie: He'll come in with the funny one liner, like I wish I'd done the dishes.

Matthew: Right.

Stephanie: It kind of breaks all that residing tension. The leading lady will forgive him at that point.

Matthew: Right.

Stephanie: But I know that's not something that happens in the real world.

Matthew: Well, it can. That's actually, perhaps, another thing we can learn from the movies. This humor, if it's done in the right way, can be what's called a pattern interrupt. When people are engaged in this negative spiral, in a way they're hypnotized to believe they have to keep it going. A well timed and thoughtful quip can interrupt that.

One that I use with my wife if we're starting to get into that is I'll say something like, "If you weren't so good looking I'd really get angry." That cuts all the tension and we're able to really de-escalate at that point. She'll say that to me, too, sometimes.

Stephanie: You've got to say it with that "Seinfeld" charm. What is it, that you're SO good looking?

Matthew: Right. Right.

Stephanie: There you go.

Matthew: Oh, "Seinfeld," don't get me started on "Seinfeld."

Stephanie: This is about the movies, not the TV. That's another episode.

Matthew: That's right. Exactly.

Stephanie: We have the movies that are able to show us the extremes of every situation. You have the clingy, the dependent, and the jealous spouses...

Matthew: Right.

Stephanie: ...all the way to those disinterested, independent spouses at the other end of the spectrum. What's your opinion on people replicating these extremes?

Matthew: They're generally not helpful because you're not going to get the reaction you want, first of all, by not being yourself but by going to an extreme. Sometimes people say, "Well, if I stop asking for my needs to be met let's see if the person comes toward me," and they don't.

What I think is missed by people going to extremes is that we all want a secure attachment. When our attachment needs are not met, we go into these clingy, dependent, jealous patterns. If you can re-frame it as attachment all of a sudden you get the other person's attention.

A wonderful movie called "Hope Springs" shows what happens when people don't talk through their attachment wounds, but also, on the process side, how that can be healed if you get to the right therapist because they get to a wonderful therapist who's able to break through all of that. So the extremes don't really work.

Stephanie: So you have Marilyn Monroe then, who's famous for that film "The Seven Year Itch."

Matthew: Yes.

Stephanie: This is one of those titles that really does apply to relationships, like in "Hope Springs" where they're sitting there and not communicating. How are you seeing real life couples dealing with this boredom, this disinterest that comes with the seven year itch?

Matthew: It's an interesting concept because there's actually evidence that divorce spikes at seven years. It also spikes, I believe, at 14 years. And there's a new spike at 35 years because people are living longer.

This is a great topic. I do some education with couples around something called hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is the scientific finding that the brain is wired to adapt to any novel stimulus within about two years, including the love of your life. So we can't go from one love of our life to another love of our life for our whole lives. We're going to age out, for one, and number two, it won't be very satisfying.

What I think movies teach us about the seven year itch is that most relationships start with a beautiful beginning. "50 First Dates" has a great scene where they meet. "The Notebook," "Blue Valentine"... Even "Casino Royale" has a great scene where 007 meets his counterpart. The French have a saying, all beginnings are lovely.

So it's helpful when you're in the middle of that boredom to realize, number one, that you can reinvent the relationship and you can recapture some of that. And you can do that, in part, by remembering what drew you together. I recommend that couples always have a photograph of themselves when they're falling in love in a central place in their home. I ask people who are perhaps feeling this boredom to come up with a seven word mission statement for their relationship to try to energize their relationship.

A very good thing that I encourage as well is novelty. Take a trip to a city you've never been in before. Rely on each other to find the right hotel and what to do in that city. Do a zip line together.

Stephanie: Oh, wow.

Matthew: Do something you've never done together. Do a dessert, what do they call it, dessert party, where you go from one person's house to the next person's house.

Stephanie: Oh, wow.

Matthew: Or, just go to dessert at different restaurants. Now, that's not good for people on a diet. You've got to figure out what's more important, a reinvigorated relationship or a diet.

Stephanie: With all the comedic timing that we have in these movies, I think of the TV show, "Modern Family." I think of the father figure. He's always so stoic and emotionless.

Matthew: Yes.

Stephanie: It's one of those situations where we think it's funny. It's there for a reason, this character, but these people are everywhere in real life in real relationships.

Matthew: Right.

Stephanie: What can these stoic characters teach us about empathy?

Matthew: Unfortunately, not a lot. It makes for a good movie, and it's very entertaining and funny, but this is a problem in marriage. You can have intimacy that's side by side, which is fine, but to have an eye to eye intimacy you need some level of empathy.

The best movies, the ones that get me to tear up, and this is a hidden theme in movies, is something called the hero's journey. Almost all movies have to show somebody growing and some process of deepening and reawakening.

One of my favorite examples of this is the movie "Despicable Me" which begins with a character wanting to take over the world and capture the moon. He sees these three girls that he has foisted on him as a horrible burden. Over the course of the movie he learns to love them and have empathy for them. He becomes a changed man.

"Don Jon" has the same principles. It's a hero's journey. So I think what we can learn from movies that show non-empathic men is that they're capable of learning to be empathic and that that deepens their relationship with the world.

Stephanie: With all these tips we have now about the kinds of movies and the kinds of things to look for, what positive effects are coming from using movie clips to aid in teaching couples about the skills and techniques that they can use and apply in their actual relationship?

Matthew: I mentioned several of them. There's the idea of becoming more empathic, the idea of a compassionate apology, and the idea of seeing what happens when cycles get stuck and how a good therapist can help them break through cycles.

I think there's a tremendously positive spiritual aspect of movies. If you notice, most movies focus on a detail in the beginning of the movie. "Up in the Air" with George Clooney starts out with close-ups of him packing. One of the great routes to happiness in life is being mindful and paying attention to the moment. Movies do this because they focus on visual details very well.

In terms of spiritual movies, I think the greatest of all time is a movie called "Groundhog Day." People think it's a comedy, but he has to repeat the same day over and over again until he gets it. What is getting it? Getting it is noticing other people, serving other people, developing your talents in life, and being appreciative of the moment and loving that person in your life. It's been rated one of the 100 greatest movies ever made in America. I think it's probably the greatest truly spiritual movie I've ever seen.

Stephanie: You talked about keeping those memories around of how you first met, the pictures.

Matthew: That's right.

Stephanie: What other motivation is there for these long-term positive side effects that can come from living life like the movies?

Matthew: That's a great question. Again, because many movies stop after the marriage begins, we often don't see it. At the end of the movie "The Story of Us" is one of the most beautiful scenes I've ever seen in a movie. They're about to tell their kids that they're divorcing.

The Michelle Pfeiffer character gives a ten minute monologue. She decides no we can't do this. We can't do this because of all our shared history. She goes into detail about all the things they've shared together, the birth of their children, the moving of their homes, and his and her job successes and failures. As she's talking she's flashing back to all these moments that we've seen in the movie. The conclusion is we can't split up. We have all this shared history. We have to work on this relationship.

That's a beautiful scene. Their relationship is interesting because they're total opposites. One of the things that movie shows is opposites repel and polarize over time unless they appreciate the differences. By the end of the movie she's come to peace with the differences. It does have a happy ending, but I tell you what, they went through a lot to get there.

Stephanie: So now you've given us a whole bucket list. I've been writing down movies that I've seen and need to re-watch or things I need to add to my Internet movie database to take a look at.

Matthew: That's great.

Stephanie: Is there anything else that you think our listeners should know then?

Matthew: I would say, in closing, that popcorn doesn't have to be fattening. You can hold the butter, limit your intake, and share it with your spouse.

Stephanie: I love that. So, there's your dieting tip. Go out for dessert...

Matthew: Exactly. That's right.

Stephanie: ...but skip on the salt when it comes to the popcorn and butter.

Matthew: Perfect. Exactly. Salt and butter, you can skip that.

Stephanie: Well, Matthew, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Matthew: Stephanie, likewise. I'm so glad I could talk with you.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Matthew Alexander and his practice, Alexander Therapy, you can visit their website online at alexandertherapy.com. Or, you can call 704-371-3070 for an appointment.

Thanks so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show or any of our previous episodes, you can visit us online at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood, Until next time, stay happily married.

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