

Scott: How to stay connected as we grow our family. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 284.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I am your host today. Welcome to the show. Have you become disconnected with your spouse after having children? Everyone always says that there is never enough time in the day. Whether you have work deadlines, social commitments or family responsibilities, we all wish there were more time in the day to complete all the tasks on our to-do list.

When you are in a marriage, you have commitments and responsibilities to each other to tend to as well. However, when you decide to extend your family, some of those needs get put on the back burner or sacrificed altogether. You may lose that attraction and connection to your spouse that once brought you so close together. What steps can you take to rekindle that connection and attraction to bring you and your spouse back together?

Earning his Master's degree in Counseling with an emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, Mr. Tony Delmedico is founder of a private practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. Mr. Delmedico has researched and written about the depths of fatherhood and writes a monthly blog for Carolina Parent about his trials and tribulations of parenting entitled, "Go Ask Your Dad." Mr. Delmedico works with children, individuals, and couples to relieve suffering and improve relationships.

Welcome to the show, Tony. I am so glad you could join us today.

Tony: I am glad to be here, Scott.

Scott: Well, what exactly is it that you're seeing when it comes to couples deciding to grow their family?

Tony: Well, in the culture, when we grow families, there is initially a lot of excitement and enthusiasm in the coming of a new child, the first child, the addition of second sibling or third sibling. The couples are excited. The families are excited. Initially that is what we see.

Unfortunately, there is always an opposite side of that or a shadow side of it. Also very quickly, what I see is a tremendous increase in stress in the family, with the individuals, with the stress on the relationship, even the stress on the siblings that are already present. It's really hard to add children to a family. The amount of stress more than anything is what I see.

Scott: Are there specific problems besides just the challenge of raising a kid in today's society, along with adding to the family or stress that's just normal. Do you think there are additional problems that couples are experiencing as they start to grow the family?

Tony: I do. I think, first and foremost, there's just not enough time for the relationship, the primary relationship with the couples. Being a guy, some of my analogies are going to be more guy-oriented. But it's almost like watching a Star Trek episode, particularly the old ones, where if the Enterprise comes under attack, they divert full power to their deflector shields and they leave the rest of the ship just on life supports with just enough energy to keep everybody alive while they defend.

Oftentimes with couples you almost see the same thing that many times for years and years, all the energy that each person has in the relationship is really diverted towards the care and raising of a family. And that's really important very early on in those initial stages, but over time we forget to divert that energy back to ourselves individually and continue to tend the relationship.

Scott: I think that's a great analogy. I like that by the way, the Star Trek analogy. That's probably where, I guess, we see probably, you are the expert on this, I'm not, when we talk about the empty nest syndrome and stuff. Couples spend their years protecting the children and putting all the energy staying alive there, but once the children are gone and they are left with just each other, they're probably starting over again.

Tony: Definitely.

Scott: Is that kind of the idea?

Tony: Yeah. I think so, Scott. I think more people are aware of the empty nest syndrome than they are of just how difficult and stressful relationships are when those children are still young. If you look back at divorce statistics, couples are most vulnerable at the very beginnings when they first get married with the coming of children and then when those children launch. There is a lot to be said about either side of those things, but when those kids are young, it's really hard for couples to admit that not only do we have a new baby here but we are also really struggling. The pressure can be really intense during those times in particular. So I agree with you.

Scott: What are some of the short and long-term effects, both negative that can occur when couples are unable to stay connected as they are trying to grow this family.

Tony: Yeah, I think short and long-term, far and away what I see is resentment and an imbalance in a sharing of duties around the house, rising anger. Oftentimes it will manifest itself as depression. You will often see that the sex life of the couple starts to dwindle and fade with time and that continues to build resentments as well.

So you wind up with two often very good parents. If you look into the family, you'll see a well-functioning, well-run family. But what couples often report is, "I feel like I have a roommate now instead of a lover, or I feel like we have grown apart and we're just good housemates running a family. So they kind of lost that intimate flame where they contacted, often the very thing that brought them together in the first place.

Scott: I've heard that term over the last few years with various couples feeling like they've become roommates. Interesting. As a therapist and you're sitting down with these couples, trying

to help resolve some of these issues in the relationship, at what point do you see the couples become aware that they aren't as connected as they once were before they decided to add children to the family?

Tony: Well, oftentimes it starts to creep in with fantasies. So if I'm a guy who's always been faithful in a relationship, I might find myself taking more notice of females in the workplace, or my child's teachers and the same thing with the woman. They begin to fantasize about outside relationships, and oftentimes it has very little to do with the fact that they may or may not be actually interested in that person. It may be that it's just so painful at home at this point that they are envisioning greener pastures somewhere else.

So that can be a first red flag and oftentimes just normalizing that. You have been working hard as a father or a mother, running on very little sleep for years and years. Of course, you're fantasizing, about how Prince Charming is going to come sweep you away and tuck you in at night and give you everything that's been lacking over the last few years. It's the first big shot across the bow for some couples.

And I was just thinking about your earlier question about when you start to grow a family. You meet, you fall in love, you're husband and wife, you're lovers. When those children come into your family, you, all of a sudden, now are now asked to don the mask of fatherhood or assume the mantle of motherhood.

And most couples can make that transition, but it's a real challenge to make that transition back, from a mother to being a lover again. And, as a guy, having your partner be the object of all your desires, now to seeing her as the mother of your children oftentimes it's hard to flip the switch and move back to her as your lover again. Those are bona fide challenges.

Scott: Sure. Have you observed any patterns among couples that are having issues staying connected? I mean, of course, I would assume that young, you're newlyweds who are just starting a family, but are there any other trends that relate to any other demographic or family structure or length of marriage?

Tony: I think the overarching pattern that I see is just one of division of labor and isolation. So if I work and get home at 5:00 p.m. And we're both struggling to get home at 5:00 p.m., there's a clear division of labor. I'll take care of the kids from five to seven while you get dinner on the table, then I'll clean up dinner and you do the bedtime routine.

So we become sort of ships passing in the night, and there's not much give and take about the process once it sort of gets etched in stone, in terms of how you are going to run the family. The other thing I notice is the pattern of just checking in between couples. So you get information exchanges. I dropped the boy off at practice at 4:00 p.m. Are you going to pick him up at 6:00 p.m.? Yes, I picked him up at 6:00 p.m. I'll grab pizza at 7:00 p.m., so on and so forth.

So you are really spending a lot of time talking about stuff of the day. As opposed to how you both really are feeling about what is going on throughout the day. How are you doing? I miss seeing you. How can we remain connected, so on and so forth?

Scott: So you got a couple that comes in, and they sit down in front of you. They are admitting to you they are at the point that they feel like they are roommates. One or both are fantasizing about having a different life. What are some specific items that you have these couples start out working on to try to rekindle that connection that they once had?

Tony: A few of those items are quite practical. The first thing is to just talk about sex life, frequency, and quality and quantity, and most of those couples report that the sex life has fallen off dramatically. And yet, oddly enough, when you talk to them, most of them wind up saying, we realize our lives are busy.

We don't have time for long extended candlelight lovemaking sessions. But that being said, I would like to have sex with you, on average, twice a week. Sometimes three, if there is a lull in the week, and sometimes just once, if we get too busy. And it doesn't have to be all of that. Sometimes it can be kind of quick and sometimes it can be more extended.

So just getting couples to talk about their current needs and what's been sacrificed along the way is important. So if they can reconnect physically, that often will bring them back into the relationship emotionally as well. Just having their relationship as a priority on the flowchart is really important as well because usually that gets thrown overboard early on for the sake of the childrearing.

And to begin to tell them that if you actually want to have this family last, you're going to have to put yourselves in your relationship back near the top of the list and keep it there. And having them begin to sit down and talk about well, what does that look like. What does together time look like for them, and have them come up with solutions. But actively be talking about the issues is most important.

Scott: So when you have a couple that starts down this path, and they start reconnecting physically, with some intimacy, they start communicating a little better. What are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality of their relationship as they are able to begin to reconnect using these suggestions?

Tony: It's almost as if the couples begin to melt together again, so by the time they come in to see me, often they are fairly unpolarized and fairly resentful. And oftentimes, very early on, once they reconnect there is a real softening in the room with each other and they are able to find again the spark that has drawn them together. They are able to shift back into being lovers again as opposed to efficient runners of households.

So the whole tonal quality between them shifts quite dramatically sometimes. And that's good because then they get a taste of what it's like to do all of those things, instead of just being a great parent. Being able to shift between being a companion, a partner, a lover, a father or a mother. That's the skill set, I think, that's required.

Scott: It's a difficult balance to find.

Tony: Oh every day.

Scott: Every day. And those couples, I think, learn to talk about that. Which is hey, you know, I've been missing you intimately, and let's shuffle that right back to the top of the list. Or I've been caught up in this lover piece and somebody needs to get up and feed the kids. Or, usually, that's not the problem. But having that ongoing ebb and flow of, "Hey, we haven't had time alone together in a while." Let's set up a babysitter. Let's go do something nice together.

Couples also learn to grab outside resources, whether it's family, friends, babysitters and to find this trusted group that they can rely on to help with some of the childrearing so that they can reconnect.

A hundred years ago, you had three and four generations of families under one roof on a farm. So there was plenty of help to take care of a worn out child. So we're really left in today's society to fend for ourselves as families and it's exhausting.

Scott: For the husband or wife who has sought this episode out specifically and they can really relate to what you're describing, that they feel like they are living with a roommate, that they're fantasizing about getting out. Is there anything else that you would like to say to them or challenge them to do or think? Anything else they should know?

Tony: I think it can feel very alone. So if your hopes and dreams are spent on growing a nice family, remaining married, and those hopes and dreams start to get chipped away at with the stress and struggle of family raising, just know that you aren't alone. Every couple in some form or fashion is bumping up against this. And they are doing all they can to stay connected.

So the fact that you are feeling disconnected is a really nice sign that it's time to go back and start tending the relationship with your husband or with your wife. So you're not alone and reach out and get some help. Talk to couples who survived it. Go see a therapist and begin to talk with your partner about, "Hey, we need to put our oxygen masks on ourselves here as a couple, and individually, if we are going to be around for the long haul for our family."

Scott: I think that's a great point, the not being alone, because I'm sure every couple, like you said, bumps up against this and for a lot of people that would have to bring on, I assume, a lot of maybe guilt, for feeling like they don't want to be with this person any more. Fantasizing about another life, away from the spouse and kids, etc. So I'm sure for many listening just hearing that this is a common issue for most couples at some point in their relationship has got to be a better relieving.

Tony: Yeah, I think so, Scott. And this idea thinking about the other fantasies. I mean, really what you are talking about is the loss of your dream or fairy tale. I mean, no one who has ever had children, before you've had kids, you never understand just how much work and effort they take. There is always this really nice rosy fantasy of a perfect young son, a perfect young daughter, and what a great parent you are going to be, and how you'll get through all these things.

And then the reality is it's just plain hard work. Just to honor the fact that this is reality is really important, but your Prince Charming is still your Prince Charming. He is just a father now as well. And you have a grumpy 2-year-old under feet for six months. Trying to refine those things between each other is a real challenge, but I think it's the task that you've got to tackle in order to survive it.

Scott: It really is hard work. As a parent, I can say that as a fact. Well, Tony, thank you very much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Tony: Scott, thank you for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Mr. Tony Delmedico and his practice, you can visit their website at [www.tonydelmedico.com](http://www.tonydelmedico.com) or call 919-623-8118 for an appointment. Thank you very much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at [stayhappilymarried.com](http://stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

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