



# Transcription

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Are you marriage material? This is Stay Happily Married episode number 288.

[Music]

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'm your host today, welcome to the show. Do you have what it takes to handle the ups and downs of marriage? Before walking down the aisle, wedding vows symbolize the epitome of romance. However, once you've said "I do", the words til death do us part sound more like a punishment than a reward. Marriage isn't always a walk in the park. It's hard. To make marriage work, it takes blood, sweat and tears. Literally. How well are you able to navigate the winding road of marriage?

Earning his Master's in marriage and family therapy from Sonoma State University, Mister Geoffrey Luce is the founder of Marriage Alliance Counseling in Durham, North Carolina. Mr. Luce has completed internships in marriage and family counseling, as well as employee assistance and chemical dependency programs. Practicing in both Durham and Fayetteville, Mr. Luce is a licensed, professional counselor in North Carolina, with extensive experience working with couples, families, adolescents, and individual adults. One of the key visions he has in life is to help others build strong, lasting marriages. Welcome to the show Geoffrey I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Geoffrey: Well thank you, Scott. I'm glad to be here.

Scott: Well, you have been practicing marriage for quite a number of years now, and family counseling as well. What are the goals of marital therapy when you sit down with an individual or a couple?

Geoffrey: Well, what I like to do, Scott, is I like to give them a format -- kind of a framework in which to kind of see their way through the counseling. Because for most folks it's usually a brand new experience. They haven't been in a therapy setting, they don't know what to expect. They're not sure where to start or what to

say. So I usually give them a little bit of an overview and this is what I give them. I say you know we've got two things we have to accomplish here. In your marriage therapy, one of those things is this big circle over here and I'll usually draw a big circle on my left hand side and say these are the obstacles that are represented in your marriage.

And these obstacles have to get out on the table. Once you put these obstacles out on the table, we can all take a look at them and we can decide what we want to do to try to resolve them. So one of the things we have to accomplish, we have to identify the obstacles in the marriage, and we have to get all of that information on the table, and we have to go about resolving those obstacles.

But I tell them that, you know, it's not just that easy. Because you have marital obstacles which really means anything and everything that's ever happened between the two of you since you've been together that has not been resolved or completed. And they need some kind of finishing. So those are marital obstacles.

But you also bring personal obstacles to your marriage. And this is the sum total of all of your life experience, all the experience within your family of origin that you bring with you to the marriage. And then those personal characteristics or obstacles get played out in the marriage. And those two have to be addressed. But they're addressed differently.

All of your marital obstacles we can deal with here in marriage therapy. Personal obstacles are dealt with outside of marriage therapy typically. Even though they're identified and they become a part of the marriage therapy because they spill over into marriage. But we really can't do them all at the same time. We've got to take them kind of independently as best as possible.

So our main task is dealing with the marriage obstacles, but also identifying the personal obstacles you bring with you, and figuring out a way how to address those as well. So that's the first half of it, I tell them. This is the first half of what we've got to do. And it's a pretty big half, it's quite a bit of work. So this is something that we'll get started on, we'll work on.

But we have another half to accomplish. And that is once we begin to resolve the obstacles in your marriage that frees up energy that used to go into that whole kind of tumble of issues that you're trying to deal with. It frees up energy to build a whole nother circle and I point to the circle on my right side and say, "This circle represents the marital vision. This is really what you want your marriage to look like. How you want to feel in a marriage. What you want to think about marriage. This is you as a couple -- your identity as a couple. The way you treat each other. What you expect of each other. This is everything you define you want your marriage to be."

And we have to do that as well. We can't just resolve obstacles. We have to build vision. So our two task is shrink problems, grow vision. Usually I'll start with that kind of description.

Scott: I like that. It's really to the point and pretty basic, easy to understand. Speaking of the circle on the left, you were talking about these obstacles. And I'm sure that would be a really huge circle for me personally. But what problems or what obstacles do you typically see that couples are experiences in a relationship that kind of fit in that left hand circle?

Geoffrey: You know Scott, I think 100%. I can't remember a time when I haven't had a couple come in and name communication as the number one problem. Now they come in and name other things, infidelity is a problem and they have issues with money, or they have issues with extended family. But they usually say communication issues, we don't communicate. And that's almost 100% of the folks.

And there's a lot of work, then, that needs to be done regarding communication. Because, it really takes in so much of the relationship. So communication is one, another one is they really don't know how to resolve issues. They don't have a format. They don't have an agreement. They don't agree together on this, "When we have an issue or problem, this is how we go about doing it." They have different styles of doing it. And if those styles clash, now they've got even more of a problem.

So the communication issue, the lack of ability to negotiate through issues, not being flexible enough. And, underlying all of that is usually kind of what they bring to the marriage. Which is, they both come usually from different types of family of origin -- families that have handled issues or communication differently. And they automatically bring that to their marriage. And a lot of times if they come to marriage therapy, it's clashing. It's conflict. It's upsetting, it's disturbing.

Neither one really kind of understands that they automatically bring those characteristics to their relationship. They just figure that's who and what they are and how they're supposed to be. But they do bring it, and it clashes and it creates conflict. And they don't really come in with a sense of flexibility, adjustment, we need to do this together. And so of course that's why they show up in marriage therapy.

Scott: Sure. And you've given them a pretty basic, it sounds like, outline of where to start working on these issues, these obstacles and this vision. What have you seen that they do on their own? Before they get to you, before they get these instructions, what are they attempting to do to try to resolve these issues on their own? The issues with communication, with trust and commitment, these other things?

Geoffrey: Well, again, the other thing that comes up predominantly is that they argue an awful lot. And the first thing I tell them about arguments is I say, "You know, arguments are good for relieving tension at least temporarily. It relieves tension. And so you feel better at least for a short while because you got it out. You got that stuff off your chest. And arguments will allow you to do that. To kind of release that tension temporarily. But the problem is that if you don't have other ways to problem solve, the tension is going to build up again. And it's going to continue to build."

And so arguing tends to be, arguing fighting, tends to be one of the ways they tend to do it, or tend to try to solve it. Often times before they've come to the therapy session they've talked to other friends or family members. They pull other people into the relationship and unless they have the agreement among each other that when we have problems or issues we deal with that with each other first, we don't

go outside the marriage and pull other people in. It doesn't work well. Because one partner will talk to family, the other one will feel left out. And when they feel out, they become resentment of the family.

Now they're not only just resentful of the partner for not getting what they want, but now they resent the family for colluding with the partner. Sometimes they'll actually make attempts to go to their clergy -- a minister or pastor. And sometimes that does work for them and helps in some ways. But it's often times not enough because there's other things they want to deal with they don't really want to talk to their minister or pastor about. And then of course there's the typical things that we all tend to do to cope with issues, which is that we might use avoidance, we might use anxiety, we might use depression, we might use drugs or alcohol, we might use over spending, over eating. We try all of these coping mechanisms to deal with our tension, with the conflict. And typically they will have side effects. So there's a give and take when trying to use those. So basically what I try to do then is steer them in a direction to use coping mechanisms that don't have side effects.

Scott: Well let's drill down on that point just a little bit more. The side effects of arguing a lot in the house or the temporary fixes of over eating, over spending, drugs and alcohol. What are the negative effects that these behaviors can have on a relationship?

Geoffrey: Well typically in terms of drugs and alcohol use, for instance, it subsumes the importance for the individual. The drug or the alcohol is the go-to guy or gal, for instance. And they'll go to that before they go to their partner. Because going to their partner means more conflict.

So they go to something that doesn't really lend itself to more conflict like drug or alcohol. Even though potentially it's going to have some negative side effects. Typically the other areas that are pronounced in the issues they come in with are issues with extended family. That somehow they feel left out of their partner's family system. Or they're being ostracized by the family system. Because the partner is now going to family for that comfort, for that go-to person to help them feel better about what's going on.

And of course, with money issues it's over-spending that I hear about a lot. One partner will spend money but not tell the other partner what they're doing. And therefore their finances begin to get out of control and now they have a lot to argue and fight about because their money is creating a huge problem for them in the relationship. And so again, all of these mechanisms that they use that they're hoping that they will allow them to cope better, end up having side effects and the negative consequences of those are far greater than the energy that they might put into marriage therapy to try to understand what other mechanisms they can use to cope that don't have the same side effects.

Scott: Yeah I can see that clearly. Going outside to other family members, even when the couple reconciles, a lot of times the outside family now has an opinion that is not so good about the other spouse, for example. And that could just continue to add stress to the relationships. Or probably even when they reconcile and get over their obstacle, if they've created a huge amount of debt like you're describing by the over spending, now they've got to deal with that. They've actually just added a lot more stress to their relationship. So I can see that clearly. At what point do you see that couples realize that they're having a problem with communication, trust and commitment enough that they actually seek you out?

Geoffrey: I would say more often than not. So that's greater than 50%, it may be closer to 70% come in when they're at the end of their rope. They say this is the last ditch effort. This is the final try. If this doesn't work, then I'm out of here. So I would say probably about 70% come in when they are really at their most desperate point. There's probably another 20% that come in because it's not gotten that bad, they're still communicating, they're still being able to resolve some things, and they know they need help. They know it's not going in a direction that they would like it to go in. And then there's still another 10% or 15% that realize that things aren't going as good as they like.

Let's say they just got married within the last six months. They kind of hitting a wall, none of these other side effects has cropped up too bad at this point. And so they really want to get at it before it gets too bad. So about that, 70% usually these are folks that have been married for a longer period of time. Let's say at least five years up to like 25 even 40 years. And when you're married 20, 30, 40 years, you

have an opportunity to accumulate a lot of junk. A lot of issues that never got resolved. And it almost seems unfathomable. It almost seems like it's just not do-able with some folks in that regard because they have so much history of things gone wrong that have not been addressed and have not been resolved. But that's part of the marriage work. That's what I'm here for.

Scott: Okay. So talking about the marriage work. You mentioned at the beginning of the show that the goals of marital therapy are to identify and resolve some obstacles as well as the circle on the right, which was marital vision. Well what specific items are couples working on to achieve this?

Geoffrey: Well we're always working on communication because communication is everything. I mean it's everything we do, everything that happens is a form of communication. And so one of the things I teach them about communication is what I call advancing communication. And to kind of put it simply, that means let's look at all of the different modalities in which we communicate with each other.

Psychically we communicate, and that is the first and foremost form of communication that all people send across to each other. We don't necessarily validate it. We don't necessarily rely on it so much. But it is the first form of communication. We have emotional communication in terms of sending the emotional message back and forth to each other. We have physical, body language communication and we have the verbal.

Now if you're going to advance the communication, if you're going to increase or make your communication stronger so that it works for you, then you're going to line up all of those different modalities of communication -- the psychic, the emotional, the behavioral and the verbal are going to line up. They're all going to say the same thing because this typically is what the biggest problem is for all of us no matter what scenario it is. It is that we get different message from each other. We get one message that says oh hi how you, good to see you are.

But the other message is I'm out of here, I really don't want to spend time with you. And we have to figure out as the recipient, which one of those messages we're going to pick up and address. Sometimes we get more than two. Sometimes we get



three or four. And it's confusing as heck.

So part of what I do is try to teach them communication tools -- techniques to one advance the communication, and two to make sure their communication has clarity. That it does inform the partner of exactly what we need and want. And there's no mistaking what the message is.

Scott: And when they start to learn to advance the communication, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality of the interactions inside their relationship?

Geoffrey: They get more of what they need from each other. Which is one of the main goals, really of the marital therapy. Is what do you want, what do you need in your marriage from your partner. And are you getting that? Or are you disappointed more often than not? And therefore you try to get that elsewhere. Or you just go without. Either one is not that great for a healthy marriage.

You want to get what you think is reasonable from your partner. That's why you got married. I tell folks you know, you get married because you want the good stuff that marriage can bring. And that's great. You want and need that good stuff. But the other thing is that you have to deal with the stuff that's not so good.

And if you avoid dealing with that, you're only going to accumulate these problems until of course, the tension gets too high and the tension has to get out and get relieved somehow. And of course that gets back to why you argue so much. So I'm really trying to teach them both the communication style that's going to give them more of what they need from each other. The respect they need if that's how they define their relationship. The love they need if they define the relationship in terms of needing love. The increased or advanced communication, the trust. All of these things are things that typically folks want and need from each other in a relationship and that's what they begin to acquire.

Scott: Well Geoffrey you've encouraged us to advance our communication. We understand that we've got some obstacles to overcome and we've got to create a marital vision. So kind of on an end note, for our listeners who think they might be

needing to seek out some help or to seek some counseling or therapy, is there anything else that you would like our listeners to know?

Geoffrey: Yeah. You know there is another thing that I think is real important. And this is not something that I would... I'm well aware of in terms of the therapy. But it doesn't always, and very often come up in the therapy because of the nature of the issue here. And that is the integration of the person. I've talked more about the couple and the marriage. But really, the issues we bring with us to the marriage are just as important as the issues we create and try to overcome in the marriage.

And so it's very, very important for everybody to step back and say okay here is what I bring to the marriage that I know is an issue I don't care who I was married to. This would be the same issue I would have. It's my issue. And I need to address it. I need to be dedicated to handling that issue so it doesn't interfere in my marriage.

That notion, which I also bring to the therapy and ask couples to work on, is pretty hard for them to fathom. They think generally that a lot of their issues are a consequence of being married to the person they're married to. And if they just find the right person, they should be okay. But it doesn't work that way. Because the issues you bring to your marriage, the characteristics you have, the personality, the person that you are, is going to show up no matter where you are or who you're with.

So I tell folks look, I want you to take a 70-30 focus. 70% of what you talk about in here is about yourself, 30% about your partner. Got it? Not the other way around. So it's important, I think, Scott, in summarizing, that both couples, or the couple begin to realize that their personal issues are just as important to handle as the marital issues.

Scott: Well Geoffrey, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Geoffrey: Scott, thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

To find out more about Geoffrey Luce and his practice, Marriage Alliance Counseling, you can visit their website at [www.Marriagealliancecounseling.com](http://www.Marriagealliancecounseling.com). Or call 919-923-8634 for an appointment. Thank you so 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.