

Scott: Three Essentials For A Long Lasting Love. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 297.

Recording: 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. Is your love going to last through life? Hardships can be found all throughout life, and these hardships can be at work, or at home. At work we have to deal with the projects, and deadlines, effective time management skills. And in the home we have to deal with bills, cleaning, and the people you live with.

Being in a marriage you have your own set of trying matters. When you are married you have to go through these hardships along with your spouse. You have to learn how to be there for one another, and help each other get through these hard times. Learning to express your needs, goals, and feelings can prove to be challenging especially when communication is not strong in your relationship. Do you have the essentials in your relationship that you need for long lasting love?

Earning her master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Hofstra University, Mrs. Carole Cullen is founder and owner of My Therapist Inc. in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Mrs. Cullen is a certified Gottman therapist, and workshop leader, as well as a licensed marriage and family therapist.

She has extensive experience working with a variety of topics including; working with families who lost a loved one in the 9/11 attacks, working with at risk youth, and their families, adults with serious mental health and substance abuse issues, and with couples in her private practice.

Mrs. Cullen has initiated Couples Crisis Care, a new service for couples based on her work with couples, and families that address the initial and unique crisis that couples face at the onset of an affair being revealed. She has been helping couples for over 14 years in private practice, and has a passion for working with couples in her practice to repair and heal their relationships.

Welcome to the show Carole, I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Carole: Thank you for having me Scott.

Scott: Carole you are here today to talk about the essential for a long lasting love. What exactly are these essentials?

Carole: Well Scott, there are three essential areas of a couples relationship that separate the master's of relationships from disasters. These three areas are friendship, intimacy, and managing conflict, and this is based on over 30 years of marital research by John Gottman.

And when I say intimacy what I'm really talking about is emotional as well as physical intimacy.

Scott: Well I really like that the masters and the disasters.

Carole: Yeah isn't that great?

Scott: Well what problems do you see couples experiencing in the relationship when these essentials are not present?

Carole: Well when couples don't have friendship, intimacy, and conflict management skills, they tend to feel lonely, frustrated, and overwhelmed. They aren't connected to each other emotionally or physically, and they tend to have inevitable periods of fighting and arguing without feeling there's any resolution.

These couples are in gridlock, and fight about the same issues over, and over again without ever feeling heard, or like there can be any real compromise.

Scott: Well what are some of the short, and long term negative effects that this behavior can actually have on the relationship?

Carole: Well in the short term when couples don't have the skills that they need to manage conflict well, they can become even more disconnected, and each partner feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding, and too hurt by what the other just said to do any other thing then hurt back.

So in the long term couples become so disengaged and distant from each other emotionally that they don't know how to recover, and their perpetual issues seem so overwhelming and unsolvable that they don't know where, or how to begin to repair them.

They stop reaching out to one another, and confiding their feelings to one another. Their friendship disappears, and friendship is the foundation of a strong successful marriage. Once they reach this point they decide to get divorced, stay unhappily married, or meet their needs outside their relationship, and this is where real trouble can happen.

Meeting their needs outside the relationship could mean being a workaholic, over exercising which we see a lot today, having an emotional or physical affair, focusing too much on the children, possibly using alcohol, or other substances just to fill their needs that they're not getting that in the marriage. These are just some of the ways that people cope, and ways they express their needs within an unhappy relationship.

Scott: At what point do you see that couples are actually becoming aware of that these essentials, or maybe one or two of them are actually missing and that these behaviors are hurting the relationship?

Carole: Well I think that unfortunately many couples are aware that there are problems early in their relationships, but they overlook it, and they don't see these issues as red flags. They're in honeymoon phase, and they focus on the positives rather than the negatives. They underestimate the damage that conflict and emotional distance can create over time.

Eventually they begin to have separate lives, and treat each other like roommates. Some couples realize there's a serious problem at this point, and reach out for professional help, but for others it's possible at this point an emotional or physical affair will begin or be revealed. When this happens it complicates the relationship, and being able to repair the relationship becomes more difficult, not impossible, but more difficult, it complicates things.

Now we see more of the betrayer reaching out for professional help to find some type of change or resolution to these problems.

Scott: Have you observed any trends among couples that are affected by this?

Carole: Well what I noticed is that this can affect any couple, at any age, and from any type of family. This problem is so pervasive that it crosses gender, age, culture, and even the length of the relationship. I've seen couples in my practice that are in just the first few years of dating or marriage, and some couples that are married for over 50 years.

If couples do not have friendship, intimacy, and conflict management skills, their relationship will be less than satisfying over time.

Scott: Well when someone comes in to see you, what do you suggest that these couples do to restore the three essentials that you're talking about back into their relationship?

Carole: Well you know it doesn't take a lot of time, or any kind of grand efforts to turn things around in a relationship. It's all about the small things often. If couples spend a few hours a week focused on building these three areas in

their relationship they will see an increase in intimacy, emotional connection, and less conflict.

The first thing to enhance their friendship requires just three basic things; building your knowledge of your partners internal psychological world, increasing affection and respect for your partner, and turning towards your partner in everyday moments by increasing the amount of your positive interactions versus your negative interactions with them. And what we look for is a five to one ratio; five positive interactions for every one negative interaction you have with your partner.

The second thing that they can do is strengthen the quality of intimacy in their relationship, and the way that they do this is by learning new ways to communicate. This type of communication that I'm talking about is, is about sharing your deepest feelings, reaching out to your partner to learn about their perspectives, and together developing a shared meaning of their life together. When you do this as a couple, you feel closer and more connected emotionally.

Now intimacy is also about passion in sex, and in order to strengthen this area, you have to combine two things; sex, and communication. And couples struggle in this area, and have difficulty talking about sex. Couples need to learn new ways of communicating about sex in order to build intimacy and passion in their sex life.

The third thing is to learn how to manage conflict better. They need to reduce the amount of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling that we all occasionally use, but especially during arguments. Simply learning to reduce these four things and John Gottman calls them the four horsemen, and replace them with key positive conflict management skills can greatly improve the quality of a relationship.

Scott: Can we drill down on this a little bit, and maybe talk about what specific items that couples are working on to increase their friendship for example?

Carole: Sure, there's so many ways that couples can reconnect and work on their friendship, but I especially love it when couples come up with their own creative and personal ways to become friends again. I often help couples remember the things that they used to do early in their relationship when they were dating before marriage, and children, and work stress, but here's some of the things that I encourage couples to work on.

The first is turning towards each other during small every day moments. These are little things, these moments are opportunities for you to build your emotional bank account. So when things get stressful there's a cushion in that bank.

Turning towards each other can be as simple as giving an unexpected smile, or helping them with a household chore. It's a touch along the back, or shoulder when you pass each other or simply a hug when you see that your partner needs one. It's stopping your favorite TV show when they walk into the room to talk to you.

It's about responding in small verbal and nonverbal ways when they reach out to you to connect. It's really about small things often, and knowing, and showing your partner that you are there for them when they need you in small ways.

Another way to build friendship with your partner is to increase your positive thoughts and feelings about them, and your relationship when you're apart from each other, rather than distress maintaining thoughts. It's particularly important to do this when you're in your work environment, take time each day to focus on things you appreciate about your partner's personality. If you want you can even take that a step further, and share what you're thinking and feeling about them everyday, verbally share that with them.

Another important way to build a friendship is to set aside time to date each other again. On these dates make it a priority to update your knowledge of each others emotional world. Talk about your worries, and your stresses, as well as your dreams, your hopes, and your goals. And have fun, get dressed up for a special night out, bring flowers, or thoughtful gifts, you know having fun with each other is key to having a strong friendship.

Scott: Well what are some ideas that couples can work on to improve intimacy?

Carole: Well couples often tell me that they don't show affection to their partner because they don't feel the feelings behind the affection, and they want to be genuine when they show these feelings. What most people don't know is that research suggests that spending more time kissing and touching one another in nonsexual ways can lower cholesterol, lower stress, and improve relationship quality.

Just 15 minutes worth of kissing one study showed, can reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol. So I recommend spending time being more physically affectionate towards your partner, either kissing, or touching one another several times a day. A six second kiss, six times a day has great potential. So you can feel it, and do it, and feel it, and do it, and it's a revolving cycle so you don't have to actually feel it in the moment, you can do it and then the feelings will come with it, because of all of the

research behind it that shows that you're going to build these hormones of bonding with your partner that will then you know, elicit the feelings.

Another way to increase intimacy is to compliment your partner, and let them know that they are special to you, and that you choose them to walk through this world with you, that they're special to you. And initiating sex is another way to improve intimacy; however this is an area that couples struggle with. They're afraid that maybe they'll be rejected if they initiate or maybe they just don't feel comfortable making the first move.

Most couples don't know how to talk about their likes, and preferences when it comes to sex either. To make this more comfortable, and safe for couples to initiate, I suggest making a signal for how to initiate sex with each other, or to let your partner know you're in the mood.

For example, have a candle lit in the bedroom when it's time for bedtime, or wear a special pair of pajamas that sets the signals that I'm ready, I'm in the mood, you know, tonight's the night for you. And another great reason to have a better sex life is that research suggests that having sex three, or more times a week reduces stress, blood-pressure, cardiovascular disease, pain and many more health benefits. It also increases the hormone oxytocin which builds trust, and brings couples closer together.

Scott: I was really surprised to hear the research on the kissing actually, that it lowers cholesterol, and can reduce cortisol. And of course we know that cortisol is one of the things that keep people from losing fat sometimes, so I guess we can tie those together, and say that kissing would be a new diet form, help us lose fat.

Carole: Absolutely.

Scott: As well as improve our relationships.

Carole: Absolutely, and you can add sex to that list too, because sex is exercise.

Scott: There you go, doctors need to write that more as a script.

Carole: Absolutely.

Scott: What specific items can couples do to manage their conflict?

Carole: The first goal in conflict management is gaining a deeper understanding of our partner's feelings and needs. So the goal is not always to be right, or to solve the problem. Sixty-nine percent of conflict in a relationship is perpetual, and what this means is issues will keep coming back, and they'll

never fully get resolved. They are issues that relate back to our personality differences in some way.

For example, being a spender versus a saver, or being a shy person versus a social person. By gaining the skills to manage conflict that make our partner feel heard, and that when they are in pain the world stops and I listen. We create a safe place for them to share their feelings, and needs with us. When you are the one sharing a complaint, one way to increase intimacy and manage conflict better is to bring up an issue or problem with your partner within a few days in a softened way.

Have these discussions with each other in the way that sends the message we may not always agree on issues, but I love you, and honor your feelings and wishes.

Another skill is compromise, be ready to talk about areas of disagreement that are non-negotiable for you, and other areas that are flexible. Bring those to the table, and compromise is more able to happen. Also know that it is okay to take a time out when you need one. When you become flooded or overwhelmed during a discussion, your brain is not working in a way that allows for empathy, and understanding. It's in protection mode, and it's best to take at least 20 minutes to cool down, and self soothe before coming back to the discussion.

But remember don't take longer than 24 hours, and always say to your partner that you will come back to talk more about this issue. Otherwise it's possible that you're leaving and fearing emotionally abandoned by you.

And last, and most important I think, use humor. Try to lighten the mood when possible. Humor is a great way to repair from an argument or a negative interaction.

Scott: When you see people start going from disaster to master in these three areas, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality, and the interaction of the relationship?

Carole: The most common thing that I see as a result of these three essentials is that these couples are fighting less, and they feel more in love with each other than they did before, or possibly ever in their relationship. They use humor more in their daily communication, and frankly they're just having more fun on their dates, and even when they're just sitting around together talking.

Their fights are less often, and the level of intensity is greatly decreased. They feel heard, understood, especially when they're having

disagreements, and they have a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives.

I like to follow up on couples months, and even years after I've worked with them, and what I found is that they are grateful for each other, and the renewed love for each other that they found. So it lasts a long time.

Scott: Do you think, is there one of the three that's more important than the others? If a couple comes in, and they're struggling with all three of these things, do you start them on one, or do you start them working equally on all the areas?

Carole: Now it's interesting that you say that, because there has been some research on this. John Gottman has done some research on working with couple on just managing conflict skills, and not the friendship portion, or intimacy, and what he found is that you know, the conflict reduced a little bit, but over time they were right back to where they started.

And then he also did some research working with couples on the friendship portion only, and these couples did a little bit better, but they still didn't know how to manage conflict well.

So what they find is that you really need to work on the friendship first to build a safe place, and then work on managing the conflict. And that's actually what we do in our two day couples weekend workshop that we're having this July is teach these skills. The first day is all about teaching friendship and the second day is about managing conflict.

Scott: Well this has been a lot of great information today Carole. Was there anything else you think that our listeners should know that might benefit them?

Carole: I think they should realize that this should feel comfortable, easy and natural. It shouldn't be a difficult, complicated thing to do. It's small things often, and if we can focus on that we can really turn our relationships around, and rather quickly too.

Scott: Carole thank you so much for taking the time being on the show today.

Carole: Thank you so much.

Scott: To find out more about Carole Cullen and her practice My Therapist Inc. you can visit their website at www.MyTherapistNC.org, or call 919-795-0101 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 [Stay Happily Married dot com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). I'm Scott Blair, until next time, stay happily married.

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