

Scott Blair: Bored to Tears, this is episode number 301.

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 Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm our host today. Welcome to the show. Is your relationship flat, dull, losing its luster? When things lack excitement in our lives, we tend to get bored with them very quickly and easily. We try to find the next, newest, best thing. If our hair is flat, dull, and losing luster, we try a new conditioner or hair style. If our cell phones are from last season, we go buy the newest version of the iPhone or Android. When a new video game, fashion trend, or hair style becomes popular, we all flock to the stores and salons to get the newest exciting trends as we become bored with our old things.

But what if your relationship is flat and dull and you're feeling really bored with your partner, perhaps the sex life is barely there or absent all together. We don't just drop our relationship find someone else to keep things exciting. How then can we add some excitement, adventure, and passion into our relationships?

Earning her doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology at Temple University, Dr. Susan Orenstein is Founder and Director of Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Dr. Orenstein has devoted her professional career to helping individuals and couples improve their most intimate relationships. She specializes in relationship and couples issues. Dr. Orenstein is committed to providing state of the art practices in marital counseling, and to that end continues to attend professional training programs.

Welcome back to the show, Susan. I was so glad that you join us again today.

Dr. Orenstein: It's wonderful to be here. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Blair: Well, what problems arise when couples become bored with their relationships?

Dr. Orenstein: I love talking about that, and this is a great question because often when people think about marriage therapy and going to a couple's therapist, they think of couples in a headlock and fighting and high conflict. But there's another problem that exists and that's when things are really flat and dull.

And in those situations, partners can feel very unfulfilled with each other, and they feel that their relationship is stagnant, lacking excitement, and

vivaciousness. And sometimes people even refer to the relationship as feeling dead or, at best, a relationship coma.

Scott Blair: A relationship coma. I've heard the term "roommates" often used as well.

Dr Orenstein: Yes, it's very common to hear couples talk about being roommates and actually enjoying their companionship and getting along but not feeling that spark, not feeling like lovers, and roommates, at times, get bored with each other, and that's a problem.

Scott Blair: Let's talk about what actual problems you see when couples lose that spark, or when they start saying to you that they've become bored in their relationship.

Dr. Orenstein: Okay, well, what's interesting is often they don't tell me initially that they've become bored. What they initially tell me is that they find their partner boring. But then when we look closer, they're bored. They're bored with themselves. They find themselves boring. So it's kind of interesting that initially starts with, "Oh, my partner's boring."

And what happens is when one or both partners feels bored by the other person, at times they have so much marital dissatisfaction that they become depressed. And the literature shows that there's a strong correlation between marital dissatisfaction and depression, and it makes sense because we therapists who treat individuals with depression know that a common clinical term, one of the symptoms hallmark of depression is called anhedonia which means lack of pleasure.

We know what a hedonist is or somebody is hedonistic, as they say. They're full of pleasure and sometimes there's a little negative word for that, but this is the opposite, anhedonia meaning there's lack of pleasure and in those cases individuals get depressed. Well, I would state that couples have the same thing that a hallmark of marital depression would be this anhedonia where there's a lack of pleasure, lack of joy, lack of excitement. So, Scott, that's one problem I see couples having with the boredom is, like I said, that depression.

The second problem I see is that one or both partners will look outside the relationship for that hedonia, for that excitement. And that can be dangerous because one or both partners may go outside the marriage to have an affair, or perhaps look for excitement in other ways, perhaps alcohol or drugs, gambling, food, excessive shopping, things like that, that takes that energy outside of the relationship and threatens the couple.

Scott Blair: Now you said something interesting kind at the beginning of that answer, that a lot of times they become bored with their partner. Their partner's boring, not the relationship.

Do you typically advise them to start working on the relationship, or is that something they need to start working on with themselves because they're kind of projecting that onto the relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, it's an interesting question, and I think we explore that. So if I'm working with a couple and there are two people in the room, then we work on how to add excitement together. If I'm seeing an individual and that's one person in the room, then we're also looking at are they bored with themselves because when we're bored with ourselves, we're not going to have a good time. We're not going to add that spark that we're looking for in somebody else.

Scott Blair: So it really depends kind of on who shows up for therapy.

Dr. Orenstein: That's right.

Scott Blair: Okay, well, left unresolved, what are some of the short and long-term negative effects that being bored in a relationship or seeing the relationship where their partner is boring can actually have on that couple?

Dr. Orenstein: Well, like I said before, many couples don't realize at first that it's a relationship issue and they're not feeding the relationship, and they think of it more as, "Oh, my partner is boring." So they may feel irritated by their partner and look for faults in their partner and highlight their faults. So they may notice that their partner is watching a lot of sports or buying expensive purses, and they'll feel very critical. As they perceive their partner's becoming boring and they're starting to be critical and dislike their partner, they may try to avoid conversation or interaction with their partner. And so the couples often become very distant.

So, Scott, actually what happens, depending on a person's personality style, when they're finding their partner's boring and they're bored, they may withdraw. And perhaps thinking about the problem, avoid talking to their partner. Or they may react and try to make a wave, try to get their partner's attention, try to create some excitement, some drama, some emotion to add some intensity to the relationship. So depending on people's personalities, they may have one or the other attempted solution to put some energy and fire back into the relationship.

Scott Blair: And you probably have sometimes one of the couple withdraw and the other will poke them to try to get a reaction.

Dr. Orenstein: You bet. That is exactly right.

Scott Blair: Okay, so you said earlier too that a lot of times we see people seeking out professional help when there's been an affair or when there's a gridlock in communication. But at what point do you see couples becoming aware that they're bored in the relationship and it's actually hurting the relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: Not as often because I think when people are bored, they're suffering silently and when, like I said, one of the correlations is depression which we're saying there's lack of energy, there's lack of excitement, there's lack of doing, people can become passive. So actually in my practice I more frequently see couples who are butting heads and there's that high conflict.

However, occasionally I do see the couples where there is that marital coma or they're saying that they feel just like roommates. And I'm so glad when those people come in because it's not going to get better on its own, and coming into counseling helps create some energy and some novelty and get things back on track.

Scott Blair: Well, who gets bored in the relationship in your opinion? I mean, have you observed any trends among couples that are having this issue of boredom in the relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: The way that I see this in my practice is one partner is feeling neglected in the relationship, and they feel like their partner is watching a lot of video games, engaged in their own friends, and they really feel left out. Often people are sensitive to their partner, and they don't want to hurt their feelings. So they don't want to say to them, "Gosh, I'm bored" or "I find you boring." They don't want to say that. That feels cruel. So instead they might act out some of that by being sarcastic or finding fault with their partner.

And I think the beauty of counseling is that it's a chance for both people to come in and really be honest. I create an atmosphere where we say, "It's a no judgment zone. You know, please be genuine. Be honest. Say what's going on, and we're going to work on this together actively and directly, not through sarcasm, not through acting out, not through passive-aggressive kinds of things."

And I find that we can create a respecting environment where people can work through this, and come up with solutions to shake things up and get people more excited about their relationship.

Scott Blair: Well, let's drill down on that a little more about how to shake things up. So instead of going to your partner and saying, "I'm bored with you" or

instead of laying around and feeling neglected and depressed, what is it that you actually suggest that couples do to put some excitement back into that relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: There are lots of solutions, and I'm going to go through several of them that can be really helpful. One is to get moving, and that's so healthy for any individual and for couples as well is to get physically moving. Have some activity, and it doesn't have to be officially exercise. You don't have to go to the gym. You can walk together. You can go dancing. You can do some stretches, but you need to get your blood flowing and your endorphins released. And that really helps increase people's libido, so that can help recharge folks' sexual energy, and it can also alleviate a lot of stress so people can feel physically better and then emotionally better together.

The other recommendation I make is for couples to make new friends, to go out in the community, go out and have a social life together. And what's so lovely about that is that when couples go out together they can see each other in a new light, and they can operate as a pair and have that "we-ness." And they're also creating novelty. They're making new friends is something that can create a lot of energy. They're learning about new things. They're possibly getting invited to different activities, and that novelty creates that charge and that energy that helps.

And then, Scott, I also suggest to couples that to break that boredom and that flatness and that dullness, they really confide in each other and become more genuine and even become vulnerable because that's really what intimacy is about. And they can do that in a really fun, positive way by talking about their hopes, their wishes, their dreams, their aspirations and the day-to-day fumbles. Maybe they had something awkward or embarrassing that happened to them today that they could share with their partner and laugh about or get support about. Or something that they're proud about and they want to celebrate together. So that confiding in each other really builds more of a closeness and an energy.

And then the other thing that I suggest that I think is really fun is to help couples create a bucket list. So I don't know if you ever saw the movie, "The Bucket List" . . .

Scott Blair: Yeah.

Dr. Orenstein: . . . with Morgan Freeman. It really was a fun movie. We don't need a terminal diagnosis to create a bucket list. We all know that we have a short amount of time on this earth, and we need to make the most of it. And what a wonderful, exhilarating thing to do is to have a bucket list with your partner, and it can be things that you would like to do, to explore, to

share together. You could put "The Bucket List" on your couples bucket list because to watch that movie is really fun and inspiring.

Scott Blair: Yeah, I actually have a bucket list.

Dr. Orenstein: All right.

Scott Blair: And I was discussing it with my family this weekend over the Fourth of July.

Dr. Orenstein: Oh, I love it. I love it. That's awesome. And lastly, I think I would recommend to couples too, make sure that they're not boring. That was the question you were asking me early on is, "Do you work with the individual? Do you work with a couple?" So I think it is important for each individual to feel like they're challenging themselves. They're finding pleasure. They're learning. They're growing. All of that makes them a more interesting person for themselves and interesting to their partner.

And they'll have these wonderful learning experiences and growth and fun and exciting adventures to share with their partner. So I encourage each person to think about what they might want to do themselves to go a little outside their comfort zone and to add some pleasure, and then to support each other and check back with each other as they do that. So we talked about anhedonia and lack of pleasure. The remedy for that is really about pleasure.

And I'd like to expand the concept of pleasure to all kinds of things that can give us vitality and energy. It doesn't mean that a couple needs to go to Las Vegas and live there, and that's the way they get pleasure. They can certainly do that, and that's fun, but when I talk about pleasure I mean in a broader way of finding that joy and that fulfillment and excitement and sharing and confiding and great sex.

Scott Blair: Well, with couples approaching the relationship in these new ways, what are some of the changes that you are seeing in the quality and interaction of that relationship?

Dr. Orenstein: One of the first things I notice in my practice that when people are sitting on the couch together, they're sitting on the couch together. They're not far apart and looking down. One way that I can tell that things are really working is I can feel the energy, I can see the energy. There's more eye contact. There's more closeness. There's more spontaneity, and there's more laughter. People can be a little bit sillier, and they can laugh and they can gently tease each other. And there's more lightheartedness and fun.

Scott Blair: Well, Susan, is there anything else about overcoming a boring relationship that you think our listeners should know?

Dr. Orenstein: I would just restate that everybody should go out and watch "The Bucket List" and make their own individual bucket list and talk to their partner about coming up with a couples bucket list. And have fun with it. It doesn't need to happen overnight. Actually a lot of the benefits of having the bucket list is that you're anticipating the fun, and you're getting to know your partner and talk about what you might like to do. So I think there's so much value in that, even if you don't do a lot of the things on the list. The idea of creating something and sharing and getting excited is what it's about.

Scott Blair: Well, it's been a while, so I think I will rent "The Bucket List" again this week on your advice and revisit mine. Susan, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Dr. Orenstein: It's always a pleasure. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Blair: To find out more about Dr. Susan Orenstein and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.OrensteinSolutions.com or call 919-428-2766 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. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

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