

Recording: Are your relationship expectations realistic? This is Stay Happily Married: Number Episode 307.

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. Are your relationship expectations realistic?

We all have our own set of expectations in every aspect of life. We have a set of expectations when it comes to work, whether it's our task at work, work atmosphere, or job duties, we come into work with what we think will happen.

When these expectations are not met at work, we often find ourselves unhappy and wanting to find something better. We look for a place that matches well with our personalities and shares a common goal to what we want to do in line so that we are happy with the work we are doing.

What happens when our expectations and reality don't correlate in our relationships? We don't want to throw away all the hard work that we've put in, so what can we do to help alleviate some of the tension that occurs when our expectations aren't realistic in our relationships?

Earning her Masters Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from East Carolina University, Mrs. Melissa Staley is a managing partner for Foundations Family Therapy in Fuquay-Varina, North Carolina.

Melissa has extensive experience working with a wide range of mental health settings and specialties. She has worked in a nonprofit specializing in multi systemic therapy, worked with adolescents with behavioral difficulties and their families, taught anger and frustrations management, communication, positive thinking, social interaction, worked in a detox and mental health crisis stabilization center, and she has conducted clinical assessments and facilitated therapy groups.

Melissa currently works with individuals, couples, families and children ages four and up. She has completed the Level II Training in Gottman Method Couples Therapy, and is certified as a PREPARE/ENRICH facilitator.

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

Melissa: Thank you for having me.

Scott: Well, Melissa, you are here today to talk about setting realistic expectations for relationships and marriages. Would you mind elaborating a little bit about what you are seeing when it comes to expectations in a relationship?

Melissa: Sure. What my experience has been is that each individual enters into a relationship with their own list of expectations for that relationship. Often these expectations are not really shared with one another prior to getting married. Instead, it's just sort of assumed that the other person will live up to those expectations.

When partners don't live up to one another's expectations, it seems that dissatisfaction and conflict usually result. Additionally, it seems that the institution of marriage has changed so drastically in our society over the years, and individuals are constantly receiving different messages, whether that be from the media or religion or a lot of other sources, about how a relationship or marriage should be.

Scott: And I'm sure a lot of that expectation might come from the household we were raised in and how our parents interacted.

Melissa: Yeah, absolutely. That's a big source from what I've seen, as well.

Scott: Okay. What problems do you see couples experiencing in the relationship when these expectations are not, let's say, realistic?

Melissa: Well, like you were saying, you know, expectations for relationships are influenced by childhood, by the family of origin, also prior romantic relationships, a lot of people come into relationships with baggage, of course, the media, religion, just overall societal ideals for what a relationship is supposed to look like.

Each member of the couple enters into the relationship with a list of qualities that that relationship and that partner are expected to possess. It seems that, since couples aren't really discussing things, they're committing to one another without an idea of what the other person is even necessarily looking for.

And so, they're assuming that they love this person, and they've decided to be with them long-term, and so, this person is just automatically going to be able to live up to their expectations, and any issues that they have with the relationship will just fall into place when they get married.

I've seen that with a lot of the couples that I've worked with. Unfortunately, this is a really big misconception.

Scott: Okay. So they enter into a relationship without having this discussion and with this huge misconception. If left alone, and they don't talk about it, and they don't address it, what are some of the short-term, or even the long-term effects that you're seeing this can actually have on the relationship?

Melissa: Partners tend to start experiencing dissatisfaction. They get discouraged. They're kind of disillusioned with the relationship. They went into it thinking that they married this person, they knew who this person was, and now it feels like, you know, that person's no longer living up to the expectations that they have.

Then, individuals often fail to realize that their partner actually has little to no idea what their partner's expectations are for the relationship. So, what I've seen is that resentment for the partner really starts to build up if unfulfilled expectations are not addressed. Resentment can get out of hand very quickly and is really toxic to relationships.

Scott: Okay. So, as a therapist, you're sitting down in your office, and you're speaking with couples that have come to you to explore this idea, or perhaps even resolve issues in their relationship. At what point in time do you see that couples are becoming aware that this behavior, that this false expectations, is actually hurting their relationship?

Melissa: The timeline really varies from couple to couple. Honestly, a lot of the couples that come in don't even realize that that's their issue, and it ends up having to be pointed out to them in the course of therapy.

Fortunately, there are couples who realize early in their marriage that differing expectations and other issues are beginning to cause problems in their relationship. It's a lot easier to resolve issues at this point because, since the problems likely haven't been ongoing for years and years, the couple maintains a pretty overall positive attitude toward one another.

A lot of times I work with couples who have been experiencing issues in their relationship for years, and in some cases, decades, and they haven't sought help for whatever reason. It's more difficult to address the issues of these relationships because the problems are so deeply rooted. However, I don't think it's at all impossible for these couples to heal and to really start having those conversations where they get their expectations out on the table.

Scott: Well, I'm sure this is a hiccup for any relationship. I mean, we all come in with certain expectations and different ideas of relationships and childrearing, and everything else, so we've all got to kind of make adjustments. But, are there any patterns that you're noticing among couples that this is really a huge issue for?

Melissa: Based on my experiences, it seems that younger couples have an especially difficult time setting realistic expectations for their relationships. I feel like a big contributing factor is just the years of being bombarded with these idealistic messages of what a relationship is supposed to be, and they're seeing that, primarily, I would say, in the media, movies, and television. They grow up seeing these perfect relationships played out on a screen, and they think that that's what their relationship is supposed to be. To an extent, they're almost setting their partner up to fail, because no one can live up to perfection.

Also, if individuals struggle with setting realistic expectations for themselves, for example, if they tend to be kind of perfectionistic, they are more than likely going to struggle with setting realistic expectations for their relationships, as well.

Scott: Where do you start in counseling with them? What do you suggest that couples who are kind of struggling with these issues do to help the relationship, or improve it?

Melissa: I definitely encourage couples to have discussions prior to getting married about what their expectations for a relationship and for marriage are. I encourage them to be as specific as possible. When you're kind of vague, your partner still doesn't have a good idea of what it is that you're looking for.

In some cases, even seeking individual therapy in addition to couple's therapy can help identify even what those expectations are. I know. A lot of times, couples, or individuals, don't even realize what it is that they're hoping to get from a relationship.

Scott: Well, you said you like to encourage them to be as specific as possible, so I'm going to encourage you to be a little specific with us.

Melissa: Okay.

Scott: Could you give us a few items that you were having couples discuss to help resolve some of these negative issues?

Melissa: One thing that I have a lot of my couples do during the first two or three sessions is they sit down and make out a wish list. I try to get them to narrow it down to about three things that they are looking to change in the relationship. I have them go back and forth and share one thing at a time with their partner. After each person has shared, I have their partner reflect back to them, "Okay. This is what I heard you say." Then, that way, there's no misconception about what they heard.

What's interesting is that oftentimes the other person does not hear exactly what the partner said. So it's a really good time to see where are these miscommunications happening? For instance, if one person says, "I want there to be, I want us to have more face-to-face time, where we sit down and we just talk with one another," and then the other person might hear, "Oh, so what you're saying is that you don't want me to spend time with my friends," which is obviously not what their partner said at all. So it's just a really good time to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

I also think it's good to have couples think about what they absolutely have to have in a relationship, as well as things that they would just like to have, and then any sort of deal breakers. We all have deal breakers for relationships.

Also, you know, just thinking about, you want to know what is expected of you as you enter into a marriage, and it's only fair for you to do the same with your partner. I always encourage people to seek premarital therapy if they're thinking about getting married, because that's a great opportunity to identify what those expectations are and really hash out any major differences.

Scott: Okay. So when couples are approaching the relationship this way, so they're doing some premarital therapy, maybe they are discussing what their deal breakers are, and some things they'd like to see changed in the relationship, once that communication opens up, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interaction of the relationship?

Melissa: Couples seem to feel a lot closer and more connected with one another because they're sharing some of their innermost thoughts and feelings. Naturally, that's just going to build a trust between the two of them. Feelings of disappointment seem to be less frequent because partners now know what is expected of them and they actually have a chance to meet those expectations. Then, expectations that were previously unrealistic can be discussed and kind of tweaked so that they better fit the couple and the relationship.

Scott: Well, like I said earlier, Melissa, I think that all of us probably deal with this on one level or another. So, for those who are listening today, is there anything else that you would like them to know about this?

Melissa: I mean, like you said, no one is really immune to this issue. We all have an idea of what it is that we're looking for in a relationship. We all enter relationships with expectations, whether we realize it or not. Bringing those expectations into the light and really evaluating them and seeing whether or not they are realistic is a healthy move, I would say, for both individuals and for couples.

Scott: Well, Melissa, thank you so much for taking time and talking to us today and being on the show.

Melissa: Sure. Absolutely. Thank you.

Scott: To find out more about Ms. Melissa Staley, and her practice, Foundations Family Therapy, you can visit their website at [wwwFOUNDATIONSFT.COM](http://wwwFOUNDATIONSFT.COM), or call 919-285-4802 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.

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