

Scott: Does your relationship have meaning? This is Stay Happily Married Episode 311.

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. Does your relationship have meaning? In school you were always taught about the American Dream. You learned how people risked their lives to come to the United States of America. To live out their dreams of happiness and freedom. Part of those dreams was and is to have a family and live a happy life. In today's age we are almost pressured into conforming to this dream of getting married and having a family. Everyone wants to know, when are you going to settle down and have a family?

With the rise of technology there are a large variety of dating websites on the internet to help make this dream a reality. These websites are growing everyday in acceptance and popularity. The growing usage of these sites shows that we still want to be able to get married and have children, but are we trying too hard? Are we overlooking deep meaning in our relationships just to take care of our superficial wants and needs?

Earning his doctorate degree in counseling and clinical supervision from the University of North Carolina Charlotte, Dr. Gerald Brown is founder and owner of Inner Compass Counseling Coaching and Consulting in Cornelius, North Carolina. Gerry is a licensed professional counselor with extensive training in trauma, family, couples, and Latino issues. He provides counseling, life coaching, and counseling in English and Spanish. He also works as a counselor at the center for military families and veterans at Central Piedmont Community College. Gerry's research interests include resilience, military issues, multicultural issues, and first generation college minorities in education. He has over seven years of counseling experience in school, college and community mental health settings. Welcome to the show, Gerry, I'm so glad you could join us today.

Dr. Brown: Thank you so much for this opportunity. I hope this program help current and future couples identify, define, and redefine meaning in their relationships and within themselves.

Scott: Well Gerry, you're here today to talk about having meaning in a marriage or partnership. So could you elaborate a little bit on why it's important to have meaning in a relationship?

Dr. Brown: Well the way I see meaning, Scott, is it is a unifying force that allows each partner to feel validated, valuable, a sense of worth, and purposeful in difficult periods, such as a job loss, or infidelity. And all the way down to everyday tasks, such as changing diapers, washing dishes. Additionally without meaning what I've noticed the marriage or relationship slowly becomes stale, anemic, and routine.

Scott: Well what problems do you see that couples experience in the relationship when their lacking this meaning in the relationship?

Dr. Brown: Well what I notice is that many couples do not even discuss with each other what is important or meaningful for them to feel happy or satisfied. Not only with their partner but with themselves. And if couples cannot agree on maintaining a meaningful relationship for both of them, then I believe and I've seen it'd be easy for one or both to stray, or become comfortable with the relationship, or separate, or there's constant conflict.

And another thing, kind of a sub-theme, is that intercultural couples, meaning both partners come from a diverse culture or just one is from another country, etcetera, have problems not fully understanding what is culturally meaningful in a marriage or partnership from their partner's point of view. And sometimes even a language barrier is present. Which creates even more misunderstanding of conflict. And one thing that many couples do not take is a meaning inventory, that's what I term it. After the first few months, which is usually the honeymoon period in any relationship. So they slowly grow apart because they lose sight of what is meaningful not only for them but for the marriage and partnership.

Scott: Well if this is left unresolved, unaddressed, what are some of the short-term or even long-term effects that not having meaning can have on the relationship?

Dr. Brown: What I've noticed in my work with many couples if there is that lack of meaning or lack of purpose than those partners feel or may feel emptiness, like something is missing and they do not know how to fill that void that exists in their partnership. So they may seek other ways to fill that void. For example drinking alcohol, using drugs, getting involved in affairs, gambling, or any other outside, external activities. And this they think is filling that void, but what it's really doing is maintaining that same emptiness.

Their lives might also turn into Ground Hog Day. And that's just what I term it. Where the same pattern repeats itself and there's no curiosity or surprise in their lives. Each partner may feel like they have to tackle their problems alone because they do not have a feeling of unity within themselves and amongst each other. And then lastly one partner may have a lot of meaning for the individual life, for their individual life, but not for the partnership. So they pursue their own individual interests without considering how their partner can enhance their meaning in some way.

And what I noticed in many times in these kinds of relationships is that there's one partner doing a lot more to contribute to the household and what I call that is over-functioning. So they're doing maybe 90% to 80% of everything that need to be done, while their partner is just contributing 10% or 20%. And that can lead to resentment a lot of the time.

Scott: It sound like there's a lot of things that can really contribute to this for the over-performance or the cultural differences. So at what point and time do see that couples are actually becoming aware that this lack of meaning, as you term it, in their marriage is hurting the relationship?

Dr. Brown: You know you'd probably be surprised, but it's usually after only about a year. Sometimes only after about six months. Especially if both partners were only focused on the surface or the face value aspects of their relationship. For example jumping into a marriage or relationship simply for physical appearance, or job status of one partner or both, great sex. But things that don't really go deeper such as trust and commitment and personal unified meaning for themselves and their partner. And for many couples though it may be years before they become aware of the lack of meaning in their relationship. So it does vary but I do notice it even as soon as six months.

Scott: Well probably I . . . I mean you already related the fact that in intercultural marriages this would be an issue possibly. But have you observed any other trends among couples that are having issues that could be resolved by maybe identifying a more meaningful relationship?

Dr. Brown: Yes, sir. Usually individuals that get married in haste and are still in their 20's due to resentment on one or both partner's not really knowing themselves yet, and reflecting much at all on what is meaningful for them. And additionally many of these individuals feel like they're missing out as the doldrums of daily married life prevent them from exploring, or studying, travelling, and growing as individuals. With respect to the length of marriage I've worked with couples whom after 15, 20 years of marriage are so comfortable they have forgotten how to bring back meaning into their marriage. And they may have personal meaning but not shared meaning as I referenced earlier. I always harp on getting to know the culture of your partner, and as much about their parent's relationship as possible. Because these insights can help all couples better empathize with each others needs and quirks. And we all have culture by the way. But this last point is especially true if you're married to someone outside of your culture or faith.

Scott: Well you've said you're seen couples even after 15, 20 years become very comfortable and are lacking meaning. So when you have these couples, whether they're young newlyweds, or this couple that's forgotten how to have meaning. Where do you start? What do you suggest that they do to bring some meaning back into the relationship?

Dr. Brown: Yeah and I have four different strategies for what I call cultivating meaning. One is cultivating meaning from a cultural lens. Cultivating meaning in intimacy. Cultivating meaning in your partner's strengths and areas for growth. And cultivating meaning in marriage/partnership.

Scott: Well if you don't mind that's drill down on that a little bit. What exactly does cultivating meaning from a cultural lens entail?

Dr. Brown: Well one thing I like to do if have the partners talk about each other's culture. Because many times I find that they've never talked about each other's culture. And then for example if I have even two Caucasian individuals in my office one say is from Alabama and another one is from Massachusetts. Well being from Massachusetts brings a lot of cultural symbolism with it and how they were raised and what they were taught. And same thing with the individual from Alabama. But that's never really discussed and put out there to reflect on. Take time to cultivate that culture empathy for one another by getting to a better understanding of why they do the things they do or why they might be thinking the way they think based on their childhood experiences, adolescent, and early adulthood experiences.

Understanding each partner's cultural beliefs around marriage is important to discuss continuously. Not just at the very first few months. And a good example of this is discussing their parents' beliefs and experiences or their caretakers. If maybe they came from a single parent household or some kind of mixed family situation. And how can you combine the elements of each culture and make them important to your partnership? So for example maybe there was a way the partner from Massachusetts celebrated birthdays and they want to incorporate that into their unified meaning. And maybe the partner from Alabama did something for Father's Day or Mother's Day that was really unique so they began to integrate this into their partnership. And I think that that brings a lot of personal meaning and then unified meaning for both.

Scott: Yeah, I think that's some great points. We really even bring our own family culture into these marriages. And relationships.

Dr. Brown: Exactly.

Scott: What specific items are couples doing to cultivate meaning in intimacy which I think was your second point?

Dr. Brown: That is really about being curious in the bedroom or any other room for that matter. And what I mean by that is just be comfortable exploring each other and surprising each other. Whether it's in the kitchen, in the bedroom, the laundry room, wherever it is, just be spontaneous. Make time for that intimate time. You know, sometimes we get so busy especially when there's kids involved that we don't even make time for ourselves or the partner in our lives for our wife, husband. So if we can be building that time into the week whether it's 30 minutes every night or an hour on both weekend days. Just there needs to be time for intimate time for just the two.

And what I mean by intimacy it's not just necessarily sex. It could be just holding each other, caressing each other, massaging each other, listening to each other. Just spending time together in some form of touch that brings that trust and that care into an awareness. And as I mentioned, find ways to be spontaneous. Communicate to

each other how intimacy will add more meaning to the marriage. So if one partner's feeling like one partner is feeling like, "Wow, you know, just, my need for intimacy needs to be watered and it's a little bit dry right now," how can we communicate that to our partner effectively? And ask each other about how to fulfill each other's intimate fantasies. So those are some strategies.

Scott: All right. I like those. What about the third point? I think you said it was cultivate meaning in your partner's strengths. Tell us a little bit about that.

Dr. Brown: So it's important I think because our society is so, in my opinion, negative-focused. "What is wrong with this picture? What is wrong with this? What is wrong with that person?" We don't look at how can I learn from my partner's strengths instead of their weaknesses necessarily. So what can I observe and identify as my partner's strengths and then reflect on those and integrate them into my own understanding. Sit down together and list each other's strengths and how they have brought meaning to each partner. Whether that's making a list or just constant reflection.

One thing I do in my own family, we do what's called the prouds. So we do dinner praise. So every time at dinner we share two things about each one of us that they're proud about, their partner, their child. And then we spend some time just me and my wife and we talk about how we're proud of each other right before bed. And that always, I think, helps us sleep a lot better. And understand that how you react to your partner's shortcomings or weaknesses usually reflects something you dislike about yourself. And it's important to time to reflect and make meaning of your partner's insecurities, anxieties and struggles and just be there and be supportive. Understanding that everyone has elements of insecurity and frailties that we must learn to accept and support in some way.

And remember that you can only control your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and not your partner's. And that's a constant theme in my work. Its like, "Well, why did she say this, or do that? Why did he do this? Why is he thinking that?" And it's almost like the individual wants to be responsible for the other person's actions and behaviors, or vice versa.

Scott: Yeah, and I'm sure you have a lot of individuals that show up hoping you're going to take their side and help control the other partner.

Dr. Brown: Exactly. So I'm sure you . . . yeah, you definitely hit that on the head. I mean it's a lot of externalizing the blame and not looking at what's going on internally and what they're responsibility is in the problems or the concerns in the relationship.

Scott: Sure, well finally can you elaborate on the last point that you said? The cultivating meaning in a marriage.

Dr. Brown: Sure, so I think I mentioned this briefly before, but list of commonalities. What I mean by that is what do each of you have in common? And make a list and start

making that list as soon as possible and just keep building on that list. Because the more that you identify that you have in common with your partner, the more you're going to be like, "Wow. You know, how can we make this list even bigger?" It almost becomes a unifying kind of activity for both.

Establish goals for your partnership at the beginning of each year. So this is what I mean by the meaning inventory. So around the end of the year, or the first part of January we all have our resolutions list. Maybe we can also add or just work on something called a meaning inventory, which is what is personally meaningful for me and what is going to be meaningful for me for this year, and what is going to be meaningful for my marriage or my partnership for this upcoming year? And you both do this separately and do kind of a compare and contrast. And try to integrate both into one list. Holding each other accountable once those lists are made is important.

Participating in spiritual activity together at least once a month. It could be attending a church, doing some meditation, participating in something like yoga, or tai chi, or massage together. Something like that. Volunteer together. I always find that volunteering seems to help you forget your own problems. Walk together, talk about life, talk about the meaning of life. Another strategy that I find is really helpful is scaling arguments. And what I mean by this is when you're having a spat with your significant other, try to reflect on whether this lies on a one to three, or a four to eight, or a nine to ten. And what those mean is nine or ten is something extremely serious. So if your partner is suicidal or homicidal then yeah, that obviously needs to be addressed in this moment right now.

Scott: Yeah.

Dr. Brown: However, if it's something that's more like a one to three, where you know, "Why'd you leave the socks on top of the drawer?" or "You didn't make your side of the bed this morning?" whatever it is. You know, maybe that's just you know, if you're not going to remember it five years from now it's probably more like a one to three on that scale. And a four to eight is something a little bit more in the middle ground and it probably needs to be discussed, but it can be placed on that amount of importance. Because I think a lot of times I see, what's called catastrophizing, where we just tend to make our thoughts become so big and they kind of take over our functioning, you know what we believe, what we think, what we do, how we feel. And a lot of times it's not a big deal.

And lastly taking an individual inventory of self-worth. Your own physical appearance. How you feel about your personality, your sexuality, your sociability, where are you with your career, specific hobbies, your beliefs about family? Self-care, are you taking care of yourself? Because if you can't take care of yourself it's going to be hard to take care of your partnership. How is your home life? Is it a mess, or are you coming home and feeling at peace? And of course spirituality lastly. But that I believe is a crucial piece because if you don't really understand

yourself very well or you don't know what's meaningful for you it's going to be hard for you to communicate that to your partner and consequently in a meaningful partnership.

Scott: Well when you have couples that you're working with they start to learn how to cultivate meaning in their relationships. What are some of the differences or changes that you're seeing in the quality of the interaction that they're having?

Dr. Brown: So some of the positive effects that I've witnessed that the individuals become more accepting and empathetic to their partner's needs, their shortcomings and they begin to build on their partner's strengths instead of focusing on their negative which unfortunately is what our society tends to do. Other positives are that the relationship feels more unified and even where there are arguments like above the scaling that I mentioned both partners can reflect on the importance of the argument and decide if the argument is even necessary at all. And they may do this internally or they may just talk about it amongst each other and say, "Is this a one to three argument or is this more like a four or a five?" And if it's one to three just you may have to let it go.

They may also ask themselves how is my argument going to improve our relationship if I bring this up? If there are divisive arguments which there always will be in any relationship, the couples that follow these recommendations as time goes on will build relationship resilience which helps them bounce back quickly from any heated debate or argument.

Scott: Well I really like a lot of these points. I like the prouds, the dinner praise and the volunteering together, and the walking together, scaling the argument. There are a lot of great ideas there. Gerry, is there anything else you think our listeners should know about cultivating meaning in their relationship?

Dr. Brown: Yes, sure, there is this one quote from Bob Marley that I wanted to read to you because I think it has a lot of meaning on what we've talked about today. So this is the quote, "Only once in your life I truly believe you find someone who can completely turn your world around. You tell them things that you never shared with another soul. And they absorb everything you say and actually want to hear more. You share your hopes for the future, dreams that will never come true, goals that were never achieved, and the many disappointments that life has thrown at you."

"When something wonderful happens you can't wait to tell them about it. Knowing that they will share in your excitement. They are not embarrassed to cry with you when you are hurting, or laugh with you when you make a fool of yourself. Never do they hurt your feelings or make you feel like you are not good enough. But rather they build you up and show you the things about yourself that make you special or even beautiful. There is never any pressure, jealousy or competition but only a quiet calmness when they are around. You can be yourself and not worry about what they will think of you because they will love you for who you are. The things that seems

insignificant to most people, such as a note, song, or walk become invaluable treasures kept safe in your heart to cherish forever. Memories of your childhood come back and our so clear and vivid it's like being young again."

"Colors seem brighter and more brilliant. Laughter seems part of daily life, where before it was infrequent or didn't exist at all. A phone call or two during the day helps to get you through a long day's work and always being a smile to your face. In their presence there's no need for continuous conversation but you find your quite content in just having them nearby. Things that never interested you before become fascinating because they are important to this person who is so special to you. You think of this person on every occasion and in everything that you do. Simple things bring them to mind, like a pale blue sky, gentle wind, or even a storm cloud on the horizon."

"You open your heart knowing there's a chance that it will be broken one day and that in opening your heart you experience a love and joy that you never dreamed possible. You find that being vulnerable is the only way to allow your heart to feel true pleasure that's so real it scares you. You find strength and knowing you have a true friend and possibly a soul mate who will remain loyal to the end. Life seems completely different, exciting, and worthwhile. Your only hope and security is knowing that they are part of your life."

Scott: Wow, you can never go wrong with Bob Marley.

Dr. Brown: That is the truth, brother.

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

Dr. Brown: Yeah, thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity. It was great.

Scott: To find out more about Dr. Gerald Brown and his practice Inner Compass Counseling Coaching and Consulting you can visiting their website at [www.iccounselling.net](http://www.iccounselling.net) or call (704)302-6434 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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