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The Therapist is In

Feature — 13 December 2011



The *Tennessee Alumnus* visited with four professionals who counsel married couples. Three of them are alumni, and the fourth teaches at the UT Health Science Center. They discussed common marital issues and ways to prevent and resolve them.

Dona Diftler earned her second degree from UT Knoxville, a master's in social work, in 1991. A licensed clinical social worker, Diftler has been in private practice in Knoxville since 1994. She specializes in adult individual, couples and marital therapy, and many of her clients are women.

Jody Long is a licensed clinical social worker and has been an instructor in the department of psychiatry at the UT Health Science Center in Memphis for 14 years. He was an instructor in the College of Social Work in Memphis for seven years until its closure. His specialty is family therapy.

Terri Parsons graduated from UT Knoxville with a bachelor's of psychology in 1973 and a master's of social work in 1996. She is a licensed clinical social worker in Knoxville with 15 years of experience. Her clients include adolescents, individuals with mood and anxiety disorders, and couples.

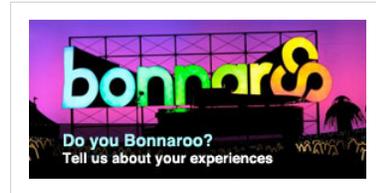
The Rev. **Samuel Payne** graduated from the University of Chattanooga in 1958 and earned his law degree from UT Knoxville in 1961. He was elected a circuit court judge in 1974 and served for 32 years until he retired. In 1976, he was ordained as an Episcopal priest and has counseled many couples in that role. Payne and his wife, Carolyn, a UT Chattanooga graduate, have been married 55 years and live in Chattanooga.

1. What are the most typical sources of disagreements couples complain to you about?

Dona Diftler: Finances, discipline, not being able to communicate with each other, in-laws, stepchildren, to name a few. Just about any topic can cause conflict if you do not feel heard or understood by your partner. By the time couples come in, they have these topics, but the deeper root of the hurt is they don't feel that they matter. It's not just about the topic; it's that they haven't learned how to talk to each other and care about each other's point of view. Once they start caring about each other's point of view, the topics seem to work themselves out. Most couples argue about who is right and who is wrong. It is much better to "argue" to understand each other.

Samuel Payne: Sometimes there is a sense of competition about how they spend their time. They can also disagree about sexual relations. Couples should understand what they are getting into before they marry. One spouse may feel sex is evil; another envisions a liberal marriage. Many couples also argue about economics. If you've got one spouse who is a spendthrift and the other is real tight, there will be problems.

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2. How do you help couples resolve a specific disagreement?

Jody Long: Resolution of marital conflicts begins by defining the problem as a couple, not the wife's opinion versus the husband's opinion. The problems that plague marriages need to be defined as our difficulty and how can we solve this problem together. The second step is to find areas of agreement. This includes specifying what each spouse needs from each other that they are not currently receiving. Examples might include providing appreciation for the husband's hard work and sacrifice and providing special gifts and cards to make the wife feel cherished.



Donna Diftler

Terri Parsons: I

help couples appreciate their differences, the inevitability of difference and even the gift of differences. The differences help us balance one another out. To help them learn that each respected position has



Terri Parsons

merit and teach them the skill of validation, appreciating and expressing the validity of their partners' positions. What happens with validation is that the intensity of emotion comes down. When couples get into emotional battles, they tend to invalidate each other.

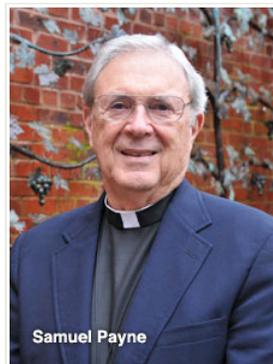
3. What are some of the difficulties couples encounter the longer they are married?

Terri Parsons: Any married couple needs to be intentional about nurturing their relationship. It's much more difficult to do when you're in those years of trying to balance advancement, careers, children and all of that stuff. There's been a lot of research done to show that the period of time when couples have adolescents in the home is the period of least marital satisfaction.

Samuel Payne: One difficulty is when a husband and wife become disinterested in one another. Guys become so interested in their golf game, it ruins their marriage. It's the same thing with work. Don't quit courting when you get married! Couples need to take downtime together — short three- or four-day trips give them time to reflect and talk, a time for binding together.

4. What are some differences you see in couples married in more recent years compared to 20 or more years ago?

Dona Diftler: Back when I first started practice versus today, what I see is a real loss of intimacy. With computers, texting, always being on the clock, there's no such thing as quiet time or downtime. People are more and more uncomfortable with not being plugged in, and most careers require constant attention. When is the last time you sat down with your spouse eye-to-eye and talked about something other than the kids, errands and all this stuff you have to do? There is so much pressure on us as adults, I think we have to decide to unplug and tune into ourselves and to each other.



Samuel Payne

Terri Parsons: Many of today's younger couples see the benefit of being mutual partners, but with that comes a different kind of stress. In the past, mom could stay home and take care of everybody. Now it's mom and dad trying to do all those things

after a long day at the office. It's just different. The stressors are different. Two-career households, that's a lot of stress.

5. How does having children change a marriage?

Dona Diftler: The relationship with yourself gets lost, and the relationship with your partner gets lost. If you can be open and be forewarned, you can try to mitigate that. You can go on "date night," but by the time you go on "date night," you're just exhausted. It's the right effort, but it's not satisfying. Mostly, if I can get women to not criticize themselves and men not feel like they're never doing it right, then they can just surrender to this endless process and try to find some acceptance and live every day the best they can.

Jody Long: A strong marriage is the best gift parents can give a child. Parenting styles and beliefs must be negotiated and agreed upon. Discipline is another factor that must be unified. Holding regular conversations regarding parental guidance approaches, parenting needs and time as a family must occur on a regular basis for parents.



6. How does an "empty nest" change a marriage?

Terri Parsons: Empty-nesters have a great opportunity to rediscover the joys in their relationship without the stressors. They're not striving so much in their careers. Their children are generally launched for better or worse. It can become a deeper relationship. Find the things you enjoy doing together.

Samuel Payne: Prepare for this phase in your life. If I had my way, every college student would study the liberal arts in the first two years of their education. They would better understand how people live and work. They would understand people and feelings.

7. Do you find differences in relationships between couples who met as young adults compared to couples who met later in life?

Jody Long: It has become difficult to get marriage right the first time in the United States. The divorce rate hovers around 50 percent. Later-in-life marriages have the benefit of wisdom and life experience. Learning from past mistakes and transforming past experiences provides a knowledge base and foundation for successful marriages.

Samuel Payne: People who get married later are more accepting of each other; they have better attitudes. Young people are less mature; they want quick answers.

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