



Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider

Episode 221

thesimpleshow.com

Segment One

Tsh: [00:04](#) This is Simple; I'm Tsh Oxenreider.

[00:16](#) Hey friends. In this episode, I'm talking to my friend and co-host, Crystal Ellefsen and as always, we're talking more about what we wrote about this week. Crystal and I both wrote about marriage. Actually, our marriages are in somewhat different stages in a variety of ways. So in this chat, Crystal goes into things she didn't know about marriage when she was younger, the things you either don't notice or assumed just happened on their own, or even things you think are of the opposite of what's real. Since Kyle and I just recently celebrated our 17th anniversary at the beginning of this month, I talk about the practicals of what's working for us right now in that messy middle stage of marriage, specifically in regards to communication and having more fun. If you read my essay this week, one of our goals in this next year of marriage is to have more fun and not always take things so seriously or be just about the business of life.

[01:08](#) We'll get right into it. But first, a reminder that I have started a Substack community, which officially replaces what we've been building the past few years on Patreon. If you're currently a patron, make sure and make your changes so that you stay up to speed on the community. If you're not yet a supporter, take a look and see what you think. Substack really, really fits the style and ethos and my work as a writer and podcast and I'm really excited about what we'll be doing in this space in the coming months. Check out more details through the link in the show notes of this episode number 221 or head to theartofsimple.net/ community. Alrighty, let's get right into it. Here is Crystal starting us off with things we don't always realize about marriage when we're younger.

[01:58](#) Okay. Crystal, you wrote about marriage this week. I decided to write about marriage this week because it was just recently our 17th anniversary. I'm really excited to talk about this because we haven't really talked about this much on this podcast. Tell me what you're thinking regarding marriage.

Crystal: [02:14](#) Sure. It was interesting also because I feel normally I don't like to tell people what to do or give advice, but as I was thinking about marriage, I realized I do have some strong opinions, not just opinions, but things that I do

think are helpful, especially for newly married couples. That was just interesting to me that I do have a lot of thoughts on this subject and we haven't talked about it, so I'm excited.

Tsh: [02:39](#) Just to give a 101 one for listeners, tell us about your marital status, how long you and Ken had been married, things like that.

Crystal: [02:48](#) We are about to celebrate our sixth anniversary. The bigger context I think also is that my dad died when I was young, so I was mostly raised by a single mother, so I didn't have a marriage to watch up close. I think that's definitely an important part of my story because one thing I think I wanted to share today is just some of the assumptions I made when I was younger about marriage that now now I have a different perspective on and I think it's just really helpful to realize I used to think that and now I have a better perspective on it.

We've both been divorced and so my first marriage was four years and we both had a kid coming into it. We were the whole Brady bunch thing. I'm not going to talk too much about the first marriage because mostly for the sake of my son, I just tried to be careful what I say about his father. I do also want to just start with a caveat of, my marriage to Ken is amazing and I'm so happy, but I do really understand what it's like to be in a marriage that feels overwhelming and challenging and it just hurts. I want to acknowledge for anyone reading, I understand. I'm not just talking from this everything's rosy and golden and life is wonderful. It has taken a lot of work for both of us to get where we are and and I think even for both of us, obviously we learned a lot from our first experiences that has informed our current marriage.

I just want to encourage people listening to remember, I think one of the most important things, especially about marriage, is to not compare yourself, right? Don't let comparison distract you. Do let yourself be inspired to take more initiative to invest in your marriage yourself. Focus on the things that you can control but don't take this conversation as an opportunity to get lost and bogged down in comparison. I know I did that a lot when I was in the struggling painful relationship and I often, it hurt just to hear about happy marriages. I just want to say if you're in a relationship that is challenging, I get it and hang in there, I think this conversation will still be valuable.

Tsh: [05:21](#) For sure. Would you say there's a subtle but important difference comparing your marriage to other marriages versus comparing your own marriage, comparing your past to your present, that that could be helpful?

Crystal: [05:35](#) Absolutely. I'm all about learning from other people and I loved hearing about other people's marriages. I love hearing about what's working for them, but I think it's more of just the perspective in your heart, just don't get distracted

with that. Absolutely. I'm so excited to hear like what works for you guys and maybe it can obviously be helpful to be aware of, I know even for me, when sometimes I hear something and I'm like, ooh, I want that. That's good. That's healthy, ooh, I want to have a relationship like that in a way that is inspiring and motivating to do the work that will get you there is different than just feeling bad about yourself or being discouraged.

Tsh: [06:25](#) I think probably that's the foundational point of this conversation we're going to have that this isn't at all to be prescriptive. You and I both hate giving advice and don't want to ever come across like we're an expert and we're also not sharing what works for us in any other motivation other than, take what might be helpful for you. Leave the rest. No worries. This is not about a comparing of our marriage to yours. It's just about let's talk as people and as humans and share what maybe we're learning as we go. That's what we're doing here.

Crystal: [07:00](#) Absolutely. One of the biggest things that I just truly did not understand about marriage when I was younger was how much of it just really is about project management and admin.

Tsh: Oh yeah. It's so funny.

Crystal: I don't know why that was so shocking to me, and maybe it's more obvious to other people who grew up in a two parent household who hear their parents discussing practical things. The way in which how you manage your home and scheduling and money and budgets and make decisions, how that impacts all the other parts of your relationship can not be underestimated. I didn't get that. It feels so obvious, but I know for Ken and I, the better we do about not fully separating, but partly separating that out and if there's any issues around it, making sure that we deal with them separately. This isn't about how we feel about each other, how attracted we are to each other, I'm just frustrated about this and we need to find a solution for this other thing.

Tsh: [08:14](#) So true. I grew up in a two parent home and so I saw a lot of the admin but I think I remember as a kid, maybe even as a teen, as I started imagining what my future would be like, thinking, it's going to be different for us because we're going to actually care about fun stuff and being these people who, just the example I would see more in movies and TV shows instead of realizing, oh no, that's not reality. That even the marriages that seem beautiful and model worthy out and about really do deal with a lot of who's taking the trash out back at home.

Crystal: [08:53](#) Exactly. This is part of what I talk about in my article, but I think in your first years that can be so overwhelming because there's so many of those things

to figure out. Now I feel like I'm in a place where I'm like, oh, we've got a lot of that sorted and sure we have to evaluate it, but we're not constantly in the new stage of trying to figure out how to share responsibilities. At least for me, it feels like there's so much more opportunity for the fun stuff because we have a lot of that figured out of at least who does what and we can reevaluate because children grow up and change and jobs change. At the beginning, even for example, scheduling our weekends was so overwhelming like figuring out how to navigate you don't want too much scheduled, but I want to make sure that we see friends. Just so many things that can have more conflict than you realize.

Tsh: Yeah. That's really good.

Crystal: Another thing that again, at least for me, this was huge, is just the importance of taking responsibility for identifying what you want and need and then communicating it. It is not anyone else's job to read your mind. It's adorable when people know each other really well and they can anticipate your needs, but it takes a long time to get there and expecting it is not helpful.

Tsh: [10:32](#) It's so funny because I used to think it would be like so romantic for Kyle and I to know each other so well that we would anticipate what each other needs and wants and now I find it crazy romantic if he were to sit me down and tell me what he's thinking without me even asking. That's like whoa.

Crystal: [10:48](#) Absolutely. I think part of that is really just understanding I am responsible for myself. It's just a general thing you learn as you grow up, but how much it affects your marriage is huge. If I am aware, I've been feeling cranky because I'm not exercising and eating well. It's my job to be aware of that and make changes for it. It's not his job to be like maybe you should take better care of yourself.

Tsh: [11:19](#) That's so true. The other thing, to piggyback onto that, I think Kyle and I, we have talked about this for years about the importance of us taking care of ourselves and not expecting the other person to do the taking care of. Not even just communicating but the doing of it. It is my job to show up to our relationship as healthy as I can be and to be self aware enough to know when I'm not healthy. And same with him.

Crystal: [11:47](#) Yes, absolutely. I think just that biggest thing of someone reading your mind is not real. There's that and related to what you were just talking about. Another thing is just because you don't have an interest, hobby or value in common does not mean that you have to let it go or beg them to also care about that same thing. I feel like this is one, was this obvious to everyone, but it wasn't to me? Even on a really small scale, I really care about not wasting things, caring for the environment. I love to compost, I love to reuse and it's not that he

doesn't care at all about those things, but he does not have the same level of commitment that I have. And that's fine. He'll go along with it. He doesn't always compost every scrap like I do, but I think that's a silly example but I think there's lots of ways in which, especially in my first experience, but still in my second marriage, feeling like, how do I hold onto this thing that I value when it's nothing that we both valued together? It's so important.

Tsh: [13:06](#) I would say it might sound silly, but it actually can really affect your day to day life and expectations. Kyle and I have joked, we read this book by a comedian years ago when we first got married and about he and his wife having different levels of cleanliness and that she cared more than he did. She would get mad at this thing of mustard sitting out on the counter and he would say, oh, I saw it. I was just going to put it up next Thursday. But if you want it put up before then be my guest and we would laugh [inaudible] It felt so true. I've come to this place, I am not perfect at it, where I have a higher need for cleanliness and Kyle does that. I can wait and wait and wait for him to want to put that spoon into the dishwasher or I could just do it. I know it's not quite the same thing you're talking about, but that's a practical hands on way I've learned to just let go because he cares about other things. He cares about sticky doorknobs and it just doesn't bother me. If he needs it cleaned then he can do it and I'll put up the dishes in the dishwasher.

Crystal: [14:17](#) Related to that, I think another thing that we do really well we did not do well at the beginning, but we do well now, is support each other in our hobbies and interests that are not family or couple activities. From even like there's movies or shows that he wants to watch that I don't want to watch. We very intentionally have nights where he watches what he's going to watch and I go read. Because it was a weird thing where he felt deprived there are things I want to watch but you don't want to watch them. He felt like, I still want to be able to do this, but evening time is our together time. That's like a small example.

Another ones are especially in the past two years, trying to make sure, we each get a personal trip that isn't a family trip and isn't a couple trip and making sure that we, now you know, we have four kids, we have to put it on the calendar. This is Ken's Saturday morning where he can go work on his hobby. This is my Saturday morning where I'm gonna go do mine. Obviously, especially when you have kids, it can be so hard to make time for those things that are not family activities or couple activities. We did not do this well at the beginning, but it's been something that has been so helpful. Part of it was that he was better at communicating that need. I don't think this is common among many women, right? I felt guilty asking for that because I was like, well, I work and I'm already away from everyone so much and I'm never doing enough. He was fine. He was doing a lot better job, I need this. Yeah. He knew that he had that need and he

was much better at communicating it. He's an introvert, he's like I need some time alone and I need to be able to do these things. At first, honestly I was resentful because I was like, but I don't get it, and he's like, but you can. Really? It was really significant when we started really making sure that we were both getting that time, which especially for both of us really is alone hobby time. As introverts, that was so helpful. I think it makes both of us just not feel deprived. The obvious stuff, we have more to give and blah, blah, blah. That was something, for example, where he communicated his need and I resented it. I would still support him, but I was resentful until I really identified I'm resentful because I want that too. I'm allowed to ask for it. I was waiting for him to be like, you should go have some time alone instead of me being like, hey, I need more time alone.

Tsh: [17:23](#) I would say even for early on in our marriage, and this could be because we were on the younger side, we were 24 and 25 when we got married. I almost felt like maybe that was an indicator that something was, I don't want to say wrong, but that we needed to work on our marriage if we both had different interests, which saying that now is so ridiculous. Of course we are two completely different people, but this could also have to deal with a little bit of our background, the type of church we were raised in. But I think I had this idea in my mind that a healthy couple does all this stuff together that whenever we came to this place where it's like, you want to watch that awesome, I'm going to watch this, we're going to sit right by each other and watch our things and it's going to be fine. And it's great. It doesn't mean anything about the health of our marriage, it just means we're two different people.

Crystal: If anything, it means you are healthy.

Tsh: Right, right. It's just so laughable now. I just say that because maybe somebody listening does have that background or is earlier on in their marriage and they might be thinking that. In my experience has been it just means that we're two different people and it's good.

Crystal: [18:29](#) Yeah. I think now in more movies and media and books, there are representations of more complicated, realistic relationships. I feel like 20 years ago, partly the church we grew up in, but also the media that we were exposed to in the average stuff. Obviously everyone kind of knows this, but it really did suggest that you agree on everything, your politics are exactly the same. Your spiritual beliefs are exactly the same and you each have your own individual best friend maybe, but otherwise, everything you do the same. I don't know how much it was my personal experience or everything, but I think I did have that unrealistic expectation that my spouse should meet way more of my needs than is healthy. Now I really lean into how healthy it is that I have other relationships that meet other needs. It's okay if he doesn't want to talk extensively about

every book that I've read. That's okay. I can go find other people to talk with about that and that's good and healthy and to expect him to meet every need that I have will only lead both of us to disappointment.

Tsh: [19:56](#) In fact, we've said before that we can tell if we're just at each other and being short tempered or just snippy, that it's usually a sign that we're not getting our our need met somewhere else and we're weirdly, subconsciously expecting to find it in each other, especially when it comes to our social needs. I just saw it literally happened the other day where we were having this, I don't want to say an argument, but just this discussion where we weren't understanding each other and we finally realized that probably the reason is he needs to go get time with some of his friends. He just needs to go get a beer with a guy and just have some friend time. It was just funny how I was like, oh, that's what the issue is. You need to go out and have a social life.

Crystal: [20:39](#) Absolutely. My last point that was on my mind when I was thinking about this, things I just didn't understand. There's two parts. One part is that how you start is so important and I think those first couple of years is really important trying to make sure that you are looking for solutions and setting up good healthy habits together of how you resolve conflict and all that. But at the same time, I think what is even more important is how you both grow and change and recognizing that you will grow and change. I think until you're older you just really don't understand how much someone can change even in five years. I just feel really thankful to be in a place now where I'm really thankful for us in particular, I brought a lot of baggage to our marriage. A lot of baggage and so we had a really hard first year or two. I was in therapy working through it was not easy for him. It wasn't easy for me either, but I at least was a little bit more aware of here's all my junk. We've changed so much, our lives are so different in only six years, so different. And yet at the same time, I'm really thankful for the ways that we slowed down as much as we could and we already had kids. This is something that could be figured out. Scheduling for example, can be figured out. It felt overwhelming just trying to sync our calendars and expectations, but it can be figured out and then we figured it out.

Even things like conflict style has evolved so much over these six years. Initially, I had, again, a lot of baggage and a lot of issues from childhood, not having good examples of conflict resolution. But now, I feel like we have such good habits with how we resolve conflict and not that it's never overwhelming but most of the time it feels like, okay one of us is frustrated or we have to make this big decision and we have a framework for it. This is how we move through this. This is how we get on the same page. It is so not stressful to know, okay, we don't agree on that but this is how we deal with this agreement.

Tsh: [23:25](#) That's good. That's really good. You guys sound very normal in all the right ways.

Segment Two

Tsh: [26:36](#) My post this week, just in light of me and Kyle's 17th anniversary at the top at the of this month, which is crazy hard to believe. In fact, we were talking about it and then we said out loud and we were like, are we sure? We had to actually do the math, okay, 2019 minus 2002. Okay. Yeah, we're right. 17 years. That's just weird. We went out on our typical anniversary date and we do a ritual where we talk about the past year. What was hardest and what was best, and this sounds pessimistic, but I think it's just more realistic. We both had a hard time coming up with what was best in our year and it's not because it was like a tragic year or everything was really hard. It was just more that it was just in the messy middle of real life. We realized we didn't really take much time this past year for fun. We didn't do as good a job as we had in the past of remembering that we like to just hang out with each other and to play. I'll get to that in a second. But the thing I wanted to talk about today was a little bit of the practicals we took away from anniversary date of talking back and forth about our past year and what we want looking forward. One thing, and I'm saying all this as though like this is how we've got to figure it out. It's been three weeks, something like that. These are things we are gonna do this next year and see what we think.

For a while now we had had this mindset of we're gonna sit down once a week and have a business discussion. When I say business, I don't mean our work. I mean what you were talking about at the top of your bit Crystal about the project management of life. We're doing the admin stuff, so we're gonna sit down and every week talk about dentist appointments and bank accounts and who's doing what and chores. The thing we realized is we would build up these topics and then have so much to talk about because you're exactly right Crystal, that's like 95% of life. That's just the reality of life. Why are we trying to save talking about this in one discussion and then we ended up leaving frustrated because we didn't get to talk about X, Y and Z that we really want to talk about. We decided to flip the script and just say we're just going to talk about that throughout life. That's just how it works and we're going to stop trying to pretend like we need to squeeze it all in one date and instead have a dedicated date or conversation where we're not going to talk about that. Instead of saying, this is when we are going to talk about it, we're just going to admit that this is just how life works anyway and we're going to just talk about it all throughout our week, but once a week or maybe even more if we feel the need for it, we're going to fully not talk about business stuff. We already did that in some degree. It's not like we were literally never talking about important stuff until this weekly date, but we would save the bigger stuff as though we needed to sit across the

table from each other, fully engaged in concentration and what we do now and is just like, no, we're just going to tackle this because we need to make a decision.

Kyle drives a lot for his work. He's in the car a lot. What we'll do now is just call each other on the phone and actually work out some detail that we need to figure out because he's in the middle of driving. I've got some break in my work where I can talk for 10 minutes and we can just hash something out. We keep a shared to do list in an app, Todo list is the app that we use, but it doesn't really matter. We just have a shared to do list and we'll just hash out, in fact this to do list is called adulting chats. This is just where we keep track of these are the things we need to talk about. I mean it's dumb stuff. Like should we just switch car insurance? We need to look into this thing on our bank account. Who's going to make them orthodontist appointment and it's all stuff like that.

Crystal: I really liked that idea of making sure that you really protect this other time and then just handle the admin as it comes up instead of letting it build up.

Tsh: Right. The reason we're even doing that is because we're just naming what was already happening. We already needed to talk about that all throughout the week. Now we're just going to say, oh, this is what we're going to do. What that means is we do have date nights every week now. I will say there were several years where we did not, I want to say maybe for a number of years we just went on dates like once a month when we could. That's because babysitting is ridiculously expensive. It can just really add up and there is that long stage where we just had to add that as part of the budget of going on a date and it just didn't feel worth it. It was we'd rather just put the kids to bed earlier and then do Netflix together or play a board game or something like that. Now our kids are at an age where they can be home by themselves. We totally take advantage of that now. Here's the thing, the kids love that. They prefer these nights when we go out because that means they get to watch something together that they get to choose and eat some kind of cheap food that we normally wouldn't bother, like mac and cheese for dinner or something. Kyle and I go out and it doesn't mean we'd go out like with a bang. We still keep it pretty affordable, but we enjoy those date nights and now what we do is we try to make those date nights business free as best we can. That's really nice too, where we have something to look forward to that's about remembering that we like each other.

Crystal: I bet that's really fun for the kids to have that bonding experience. That feels special too.

Tsh: I think so. I think that they like suddenly that they're in charge of me. We always joke when we leave the house that the dog is in charge. But I think there's

something freeing for them about we run the house for two hours and we're never far. Honestly, we live in a walkable neighborhood, so we walk to a restaurant so it's kinda ridiculous, but they think it's great fun. Here's the other little p.s.—I'm hoping that they'll take this and put it in their back pocket, remembering that their parents went on dates a lot. I like that our kids see that we have a life outside of them. I think that that's healthy and good and it's just a good reframing that they can take into their own marriage. That yes, being a parent is an important job, but it's not the only thing about us.

Then the last thing that's just interesting and I think you hinted at this a Crystal when you were talking about this need for hobbies, basically us to have our own life. Kyle and I do have that, I love to read and he loves to woodwork and we do our thing and we have our own friends, but we also, 17 years into our marriage have realized because we need to play more and because we just crave playing together, remembering that we liked each other back like when we were dating or early in our marriage that we need to find a hobby together. That's actually something we want to do. We want to find something we are both interested in and just give it a try it like in a super low key, no pressure way. We're not going to fake liking something.

Crystal: Sure, you're going to explore.

Tsh: Kyle's and I have brought up different topics and we're both vetoing them like, no, I just am not going to get into that. I'm sorry. Or that costs a bajillion dollars that, the hobby is not that important. The hobby isn't the thing, right? It's the spending time together and playing and not making everything about getting stuff done or the hard stuff of life or the deep stuff of life.

Where we're landing right now, and this makes me feel 87 years old, I could be, I don't know, it's not really an old person thing, but it just feels like it's sometimes, we're going to try the hobby of gardening and landscaping our backyard. There's a little bit of tongue and cheek to this because we need to do it anyway. This is part of our home renovation, but we got to talking about how the backyard to us feels like a blank slate. It really is just sort of a square of grass right now. There's literally not even a tree in the backyard. We have trees around us from our neighbors, but we don't have one. Other than just a few square foot beds that we've had off to the side with the kids, we're gonna just start doing one thing a month in our backyard as a hobby. It also feels hobby-ish because we can be a little more artistic and creative and it's less like get the wiring on the electrical done the way our home renovation feels. It feels a little bit more like art, so to speak and we also like that it's outside. We also like that it's physical, it's moving, it's not just sitting around and talking about something and we like that we get the pay off, it's art that we to then enjoy later on in life. We're going to do one thing a month in the backyard. This first month we're literally going to

plant that tree. We were at the garden center a week ago looking, getting ideas on what type of tree we want to and where to plant it and all that good stuff. We're going to plant a tree this month and then next month we'll do something else.

It's just a slow passion project that we're going to hopefully enjoy for several years because we want to live here for awhile and just see where it takes us. I don't know, maybe this isn't officially a hobby. Maybe it's just a fun task. But that's the reality for us right now. We are not in a stage of life right now to take up skydiving or fly fishing or whatever people do. I forget what people do for fun. This is just what we have chosen to do and it just feels close to home and we're both interested in it. That's where we're at.

The takeaway here is not guess what Kyle and Tsh are now gonna start working on their backyard. The takeaway is that if you do feel that 17 year or just in the thick of real life, raising teens, raising tweens, this is where we're at right now, that it can feel, I don't want to say like drudgery or terrible, it just can feel not fun, sort of just blah that perhaps there's some practical simple thing you can do to play more, to have more fun. Maybe that's something you can think about.

Crystal: [37:02](#) I love this because it could be a hobby. It could also just be a short term project that you work on for a year and then you're like, okay, now we're going to try something else or whatever it is like, but having something that is a project together that isn't parenting right and isn't about productivity and managing the home, I think it is so important. I think even more so, I know for us, we have also done a lot of planting in our yard and it's fun because both of us are beginners. I like the element where we're both learning. It's not like one of us is the expert and one of us isn't, but we're both like, oh, what's the best way to prune an orange tree and what time of year. Look what I learned about how we should take care of our lime tree. It feels like something that we're learning together and doing together.

Tsh: [38:00](#) Yeah. I love that. That's a great point. I completely agree. Neither Kyle nor I have green thumbs yet and so we're willing to learn together and it's fun and you're right that it's a slow project that could have an end date and we could just say we're done. This is good enough. Or it can be something we cultivate for years and years and who knows? And there's no pressure. I think that's key, that this is just for fun. We're not trying to aim for some huge goal that now we're like expert landscapers or something. It's just a piddle together and just to play around.

Crystal: Love it.

Tsh:

[38:40](#) Okay. We mentioned a few of our favorite books on marriage in that chat. Here they are. Crystal and I are both big fans of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman. Then Crystal recommends one called *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts* by Les & Leslie Parrot. We've got both of those linked in the show notes of this episode number 221. You can find Crystal at crystalellefsen.com on Instagram @[crystal.ellefsen](#) and to keep up with me, I'm on Twitter @[Tsh](#) and Instagram @[tshoxenreider](#) and of course attheartistsimple.net where you can find my writing as well as Crystal's. Again, head to the show notes for this episode number 221 @[thesimpleshow.com](#) or you can find all sorts of things, links to the things we talked about, where you can sign up for my weekly email called Five Quick Things, how you can become an insider by supporting this work as well as how to connect with Crystal and myself. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle, Andrea Debbink and my furry intern, Ginny. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Tsh Oxenreider and I'll catch you back here soon.