

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Coping with Your Child's Behavioral and Emotional Issues

This is Episode number 24 of Stay Happily Married, "Coping with Your Child's Behavioral and Emotional Issues."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen. Hello, welcome to the show. I'm your host today. I'm glad you could be here with us. I'm in the studio with Dr. Kristen Wynns. Kristen is a licensed psychologist practicing in Durham, North Carolina. She holds both a master's degree and a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro and has been in private practice for four years. She is married -- and has been for 10 years -- and has two young children.

I'm always impressed with our guests that are married and have children, especially when we're talking about being married and having children. I always wonder about someone that wants to give us good advice who has never been married or doesn't have any children when we're dealing with those topics; but, hey, different strokes for different folks.

Dr. Kristen Wynns, welcome to the program. Glad you could be with us today.

Kristen Wynns:

Thank you.

Lee Rosen:

We're very excited to have you back. You have been here with us to talk about marital conflict and its effect on your kids. Today we're shifting gears a little bit and talking about this whole idea of coping

with your child's behavioral and emotional issues. In a lot of ways I don't feel like the two topics that you and I have worked on together, the whole coping with your kids' issues and dealing with conflict -- in some respects they're very similar because we have a lot of conflict coming with coping with our kids, right?

Kristen Wynns: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'm really interested in finding out your input about these topics. You see people all day long; you're seeing kids and their parents, yes?

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Now, are you dealing with a lot of different kinds of behavioral and emotional issues with kids? What kinds of things are you dealing with?

Kristen Wynns: For the most part I see little kids on up through teenagers. So really they probably fall into the categories of behavior problems like ADHD or oppositional defiant problems, anger problems, and then the emotional side working with a lot of kids with depression and anxiety.

Lee Rosen: And so you're seeing all these issues with the kids. Are you also spending time with the parents? Is that a part of your job?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I always tell parents that they have a critical role in their child's success in coming in, so I try to make it a point every session to spend at least a few minutes talking to the parents.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So they're getting an update. What about the parents -- I assume if you have a kid with, for instance -- oh, I don't know -- ADHD and so the kid is having trouble in school and you're having to deal with that, that's causing you stress at home between you and your spouse. Do you meet with the parents together to -- do they get their own hour or whatever, or are they just getting these little doses in between kid sessions?

Kristen Wynns: A lot of times I do request that parents come in for separate parent sessions because with a lot of these problems that kids have there are really specialized parenting strategies that are effective for working with these problems at home. So a lot of times I'll request that a parent or both parents come in for their own session where we can really just delve in a lot more deeply with the kinds of strategies that parents might use at home to see more success.

Lee Rosen: Would you say that when the children are experiencing these issues that it has a huge effect on the whole house -- everybody in the house, other kids, mom, dad, everybody -- or are these issues sort of in isolation with the kid?

Kristen Wynns: It probably depends to a certain extent on the problem that the child is having, but I know that research shows that parents who have kids with behavior problems, emotional problems, any kind of special needs have higher stress levels than other parents. And from my own experience I think that more often than not you see the parents' relationship with each other is affected, the entire family system is affected because it's a lot of energy and work and stress that goes with dealing with these problems and kids.

Lee Rosen: Do parents tend to automatically blame one another for stuff that's going wrong with the kid? Is there a temptation to -- "This kid wouldn't have this problem if you hadn't done this five years ago"?

Kristen Wynns: I think you see that, but I think what you see more often is just that parents take out their stress and frustration on the other parent, that everyone kind of recognizes that the child needs to be protected because they have enough on their plate. So I think a lot of times you see that the parents see each other as a safe target where "they're an adult, they can handle it." So more often I see that parents just sort of take out their stress and frustration on the other parent and really unleash some of that frustration on their spouse instead of dealing with it in a more effective way.

Lee Rosen: So instead of freaking out at the kid, the parents are expressing all that in a negative way, potentially, towards their spouse.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do you find that the parents are coming to you and asking for help with the issues of coping with the kid's issues?

Kristen Wynns: I think for most parents that's an afterthought, and a lot of times they won't even recognize that their own mental health or their own stress levels or their own marriage has taken a hit until, through my questioning and talking to them, I'll point out, "You seem pretty stressed by this. You would probably benefit from seeing your own therapist to deal with some of your anxiety or depression that's related to this." I think parents are so good at focusing on their children's needs and a lot of times that happens to the exclusivity of dealing with their own problems, their own mental health, or the health of the relationship of their marriage.

Lee Rosen: So everything that's going on with your child -- you're getting treatment, you're dealing with what's going on at school or with the siblings -- and you really don't have time to focus on yourself or your marriage.

Kristen Wynns: Right. That's just sort of forgotten there unless someone points it out, or unless things get so bad that you recognize, "There's really a problem here with our marriage. We've neglected it for too long."

Lee Rosen: Do you feel like people neglect the marriage to such an extent that these issues with kids do result in a lot of marriages untangling, falling apart?

Kristen Wynns: I think it really depends on how bad things get. And some parents are just simply better at managing a lot of different stressors in their life, so some parents might be able to handle taking their child to get their services, still recognizing that they need to spend time with their spouse in a meaningful way; some parents can do that. Other parents who might be more vulnerable, for whatever reason, might see very quickly that their marriage is sort of neglected and left there to flounder, or that their own individual functioning is taking a hit. So there's a lot of variation depending on the person's coping abilities to being with.

Lee Rosen: So are there steps that you take routinely in your practice to help parents to figure out how to cope with what's going on with the issues with the children?

Kristen Wynns: Yes. I think one thing that I see a lot is that parents, when they have a child with any kind of special needs -- whether it's an actual diagnosis or just a child with really intense anger problems that is sort of terrorizing the family -- I think that with whatever scenario you're seeing a lot of parents become polarized and you'll see that one parent sees the child as much worse, is much more negative and pessimistic about the problems. You'll see the other parent sort of take the opposite approach that, well, "He's okay. This is just a stage. You're blowing things out of proportion."

So a lot of my work is helping parents see the positives and the weaknesses in their children and seeing the broader perspective and respecting that their spouse has a different opinion and that the truth is probably somewhere in between; and working with them to kind of communicate better and not do the blame game where they're blaming the other parent or sort of saying, "You're not coping with this right," because there's no prescribed way to cope with these problems. Parents have different ways of coping.

Lee Rosen: Right. When you say parents have different ways of coping, do people feel like they're failing when stuff is going on like this with their kids? Is that part of what some people are experiencing?

Kristen Wynns: I think so. Before parents call me to come in for an appointment I think a lot of them have been struggling for a while on their own because there is still somewhat of a stigma with having a child with these problems and a lot of parents feel embarrassed or ashamed or feel like they're just bad parents and they brought this on themselves. So a lot of times parents are somewhat hesitant to reach out to professionals, or even to their own family and friends, because they feel like this is a secret, something that would reflect badly on the family or on us as parents.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so is that part of -- are you helping them through that? Are you helping them to sort of deal with that, or how does that work?

Kristen Wynns: Well, once they do come in, that's when the good work can really begin because I can not only help the child directly with his or her problems but I can sort of point the parents to other resources that can help them with their stress levels and can help their marriage not to take a hit. So I can direct them towards support groups, towards good books to read, good articles to read, encourage them to enlist the help of their support system -- to get their family and friends involved. And those things -- you find that parents, when they have less stress they're better parents; that's kind of obvious. So what's really a rewarding part of the job is not only to help the child directly but to also help the parents so that they're more effective as parents and the whole family system is functioning better.

Lee Rosen: So some of the resources you mentioned I'm very curious about. Now, the bookshelves -- you go into Barnes & Noble or Borders or look at Amazon.com, the books are filled with volumes about kids and ADHD or oppositional defiant disorder, different learning disabilities, are these books really helpful?

Kristen Wynns: I think it all depends on what kind of parent you are. I know a lot of parents that come to see me are self-help gurus and they have read all those books, they've learned a lot from them. But some parents really just don't take information that way and they're more the type to benefit from one-on-one coaching with me instead of me directing them towards a book. So I think some parents really find those books helpful and other parents really need the direct coaching.

Lee Rosen: Now, you mentioned support groups and there is now I think a support group in every city for everything. Are those useful ways to go for parents?

Kristen Wynns: I think those are great. Again, so many parents feel like they're the only parents in the world dealing with this problem. And when they go to these support groups they find that they're not alone, that there's a community of people who are dealing with these issues, and it just gives them a sense of relief to know that there are resources that are broader that can help them. And these days with technology it's so great that they don't even have to go to an in-person support group. They can find many support groups online. They can find message boards where all parents of kids with ADHD go and post messages and questions. There's blogs they can read. They can start their own blog. I mean, it's amazing with technology; there's no excuse for not being connected to the broader community when you're dealing with a child's problems like this.

Lee Rosen: It must be very different for -- you have kids that you're seeing that have such a range of issues and such a range of severity of those issues. So if you've got a kid with ADHD I assume that's a relatively short-term problem; at least, it's mostly a school problem, I guess. You get through school and you go on with life. Then you've got kids you're dealing with who have major, major -- like, I guess Asperger's is sort of a lifetime sort of thing. Do you get pretty different issues for the parents when they're trying to cope with these sort of moderate things versus I guess more severe things? Maybe that's a judgment I'm wrong about, but I'm curious what you think about that.

Kristen Wynns: Well, yeah. And actually, ADHD is considered to be a chronic disorder. Often times when kids reach adulthood they can handle it better because they're not forced to sit at a desk for eight hours a day, but I actually have worked with quite a few adults and tested quite a few adults who still are struggling with ADHD-related symptoms.

But to get to your question, I think that that's one thing that really stresses parents out is the chronic disorders and thinking, "Okay. Will my child be able to go to college like I had hoped? Will they be able to have a successful relationship and marry and get me those grandkids?" I think a lot of parents get stressed that a lot of these disorders do have a longer term prognosis.

But even something like oppositional defiant disorder or an anger problem, I think that while a parent is dealing with those problems it's still very stressful for them and you never know if those

problems sort of hint at a bigger issue that might be going on with the child that could be a lifelong issue. So I think that it's always stressful. Parents always want their children to be successful and they're always kind of looking at that long-term picture.

But part of why it's helpful when they reach out for help is you can really show that this is a step-by-step process. You're not going to have success overnight, but you're just going to deal with it now the best you can. Five years down the road when they're a teenager, you're going to have to adapt and come up with different strategies.

Lee Rosen: The joke that we always here is better living through chemistry. And a lot of these issues, or at least some of these issues -- I guess ADHD is a good example -- all the kids seem to be on medication for that. And oppositional defiant disorder, it seems like there are other medications for that. Do parents come in and say, "Look, we have a plan for how we're going to cope with this. Fill him up. Let's get him straightened out"? A) Is that fairly common; is that the solution to most of these problems; and B) does that work fairly quickly if that is the solution?

Kristen Wynns: You know, I always tell parents -- because that is a common question and I always tell parents that I'm very conservative when it comes to recommending medication only because the research is so clear that a lot of these other techniques can be just as helpful. So with parents I always take the strategy let's try X, Y, and Z first. If the kid is still struggling, then I don't have a problem recommending medication for a specific problem like ADHD, where research shows that's effective.

There's a lot of controversy, as you might know, with prescribing antidepressants for young children and a lot of those problems that can come when such young children take those medications. So I'm even more conservative when it comes to those kinds of medication questions, that there are so many other things you can do to combat depression and anxiety in children and I really would be very wary about ever recommending antidepressants for young children.

Lee Rosen: Do a lot of these kids know that what's going on with them is driving their parents crazy and giving them trouble, making it hard for them to cope? Do they understand that?

Kristen Wynns: That's a good question. I think it really probably depends on the child. Some children are so sensitive and you're sort of surprised that they're a kid; they have such a grown-up way of seeing the world. And then other kids, especially with the behavior problems, are clueless and they are just in their own bubble. And a lot of times

they're bothered by their behavior too and they sort of feel like -- a lot of times parents come to me and say, "My kid wanted to see you because they feel like there's something that's causing this and they don't have control over it."

So a lot of kids are kind of along for the ride and they don't quite know what's going on either, and they certainly then couldn't take the next step of realizing, "Hey, if this is stressing me out it's probably stressing out my parents too."

Lee Rosen: Right. Going back to something you said a few minutes ago, I'm wondering if there are gender-related distinctions. For instance, you said that sometimes one parent will say this is a really big deal and the other will say it's no biggie; the kid's going through a stage, or whatever. Are there things like that that do tend to be more the husband responding in a certain way, versus the wife; or are all these responses kind of mixed up by gender?

Kristen Wynns: You know, my answer comes from my own clinical practice and my own experience, so I'm not sure if research has found anything. But my experience is that mothers are the protectors and that they don't want to see a problem with their child. So they would be the ones to say, "I'm sure it's just a stage. Just give him time." And the fathers might be more -- objective isn't quite the right word, but they might be a little more able to take a step back and say, "Look, this isn't age appropriate. They're not where they should be in school. This is a problem." And again, that's just from my own experience in my practice. There may be a complete variation depending on the family.

Lee Rosen: Right. The first time you see a child do you usually see the parents, or do you see the parents and the child? How does that usually work?

Kristen Wynns: I love to see the parents first without the children because we can really get in depth with the problems and we don't have the concern that the child is sitting there, playing in the corner, taking in everything we're saying and having even more damage done with all of their weaknesses sort of paraded out. So I often ask parents to come in alone for the first session so we can speak freely and I can get all the information I need. And then when the kid comes in, it's a lot more relaxed and I already kind of know what we're looking for and what the goals are.

Lee Rosen: Is it fairly common for you at that first session to be giving parents advice on how to cope with what's going on with the kid? Does that come up?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I like for people to get their money's worth, so I like for them to leave that first session already with a homework assignment, so to speak, whether it's to log the anger outbursts or if it's to set up the basics of a behavior plan. I like for them to leave already kind of knowing a couple things they could be doing to help their problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that sounds good. And then I assume people are constantly checking in with you. You're realizing that they're still struggling with it and you're giving them feedback as the kid continues to go through treatment. That's very interesting.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Are there other things that we ought to know about how we can better cope with our children's behavioral and emotional issues, things we haven't had a chance to cover?

Kristen Wynns: The one thing we haven't covered that I think is important is, again, all parents -- even if you have a typically developing child, which I'm not even sure what that is anymore -- but if you have a child who's pretty well behaved, you don't have a lot of problems, I think all parents suffer from focusing on their child and sort of engaging in that short-hand communication with their spouse where at the end of the day you're simply spitting out information at each other. You're saying, "Don't forget, Johnny's got soccer at 3:00 tomorrow and Lucy's got ballet on Saturday and we've got to mow the grass for that cookout this weekend," and it's just simply two people swapping information.

So even more so when you've got a child with these kinds of problems, it's really important that parents don't forget to spend that time with each other just hanging out, having quality time -- even if it's just a few minutes in the morning, sharing a cup of coffee; or in the evening when the kids are in bed, hanging out for a few minutes. And by the same token, to take care of themselves, to engage in those good self-care things like getting good exercise, getting good sleep, doing things that relax you like reading a good book.

So many times as parents everything is just about the kid and we forget that it's really important that you take time to focus on your marriage and keeping that nurtured and strong, and to take care of yourself, because the better you take care of yourself the more effective you're going to be as a parent.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good advice. It is tough because you're dealing with kids, you're running yourself ragged; and then when you have a kid who has some sort of emotional or behavioral issue, boy, you're really worn out and exhausted.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: So, yeah, there is not a lot of time left for Mom and Dad to focus on Mom and Dad. Tough. Staying happily married is harder than it sounds.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Well, I appreciate you being here today, Dr. Kristen Wynns, and sharing some advice about staying married and all of the issues that come from coping with your children's behavior and emotional issues. Thank you very much.

Kristen Wynns: Sure thing.

Lee Rosen: If you are interested in learning more about this topic or any of the issues that come up in dealing with figuring out how to cope with your children's issues, Dr. Wynns has a website at www.KristenWynns.com. And we will of course put a link to that in the show notes. You can get information about the counseling services that she offers for couples, services for children, group therapy, all the things that will help you with dealing with all of these issues. Also, if you need to reach her office she can be reached at (919) 805-0182.

Thank you for listening in this week. I hope that you have picked up some tips that will help you to stay happily married. We would love to hear your feedback if you have any. Don't hesitate to call our comment line at (919) 256-3083 or shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We'd appreciate you letting us know how we're doing, any suggestions for topics you'd like to hear on future shows, anything at all; we very much appreciate your feedback.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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