

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.



Fighting Fairly

This is Episode number 26 of Stay Happily Married, "Fighting Fairly."

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. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here in the studio in Raleigh but I'm on the telephone with Dr. Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones. She is a psychologist who has been practicing for over nine years and is currently with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Katrina has a master's degree in forensic psychology, a doctorate in clinical psychology, conducts psych-educational trainings and teaches university students.

Welcome to the show, Katrina. I'm glad you could be with us today.

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Lee Rosen:

You know, I'm curious as we talked about your education there for a minute, but forensic psychology means what, exactly?

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Well, it's really kind of the intersect of law and psychology. So it means a lot of different things. It can be working with families who are involved in the legal system, it can be working with individuals who have kind of gotten themselves into some trouble, that type of thing.

Lee Rosen:

Okay. And then you went on and got your doctorate in clinical psychology. Where did you do that?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: The American School of Professional Psychology in Virginia.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And then you ended up in Durham.

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: Yeah. I've actually kind of been back and forth between Durham. My parents live out in Western North Carolina out in Boone, so I've decided to find a place in the middle that I like.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, we're talking today about fighting fairly and so I guess -- and it certainly seems this way in my marriage -- that fighting is inevitable, at least to some extent, yes?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: Oh, absolutely.

Lee Rosen: Okay. We're going to fight; we're going to teach people today how to do it fairly. Is that really possible?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: I think so. I think all couples have disagreements and it's just a matter of figuring out what you're doing in the moment, because a lot of people just don't think about it ahead of time.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. Well, I want to win. I don't know if I want to fight fairly.

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: So it's thinking about what the winning really means.

Lee Rosen: Right. Do we stay married after the fight?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you're married, yes?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And how long have you been married?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: A little over four years.

Lee Rosen: Now, do you always fight fairly?

Katrina Kuzszyzyn-Jones: Probably not. I try my best and I think that I do try to be thoughtful about what I do. But I think more importantly is when I recognize that I'm not fighting fairly I apologize and kind of try to start over.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Now, your husband, I assume, is not a psychologist?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: No. He's a school teacher.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So does he feel like it's not a fair fight because you have all this training and education and all this stuff?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Nay, he's smarter than me so it's an even match.

Lee Rosen: Okay. It all works out. So with marriage, a big part of it is opening up emotionally to you partner, building trust, but that makes us vulnerable. What I worry about is -- you want to be vulnerable, you want to build trust, but doesn't that sometimes sort of open you up to in a fight your spouse really attacking you in a way that hurts a lot more than it might otherwise hurt?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: It can. I think it's a matter of kind of coming to some sort of agreement about how you guys are going to have disagreements.

Lee Rosen: So we ought to have a plan in advance is what you're suggesting?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Right. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: Okay. How do we do that? Do you really recommend, it's like, "Let's have a meeting and let's talk about the fighting plan for when the fight comes?"

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, I think it's more a matter of before people get married being able to have conversations about what are the kinds of things that might come up, what are the kinds of things that have been issues as we've been dating? Rather than going into it with, "Everything is going to be fine when we get married," and pretending that problems won't still be there. Being able to talk about those problems ahead of time so that you kind of know what's coming your way.

Lee Rosen: I've got a whole bunch of questions that are popping into my head. Fighting is a -- I worry about this. But what are the most common things that you see people fighting over?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: I think that people fight over any number of things. I mean, people do tend to fight about money. They tend to fight about sex. They do fight about in-laws a lot. But they also tend to fight about just kind of everyday daily activities. So are your chores equitably distributed? Are you kind of doing the things that you've told each other you're going to do on a daily basis? Those seem to be where the little nit-picky kinds of things really end up in big fights.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. And when you see people fighting unfairly what does that look like? What are they doing when they're really not following the rules that you're going to help us with?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, most of the time you're not really fighting about what you're fighting about. There's some underlying thing going on, whether it's that you're feeling rejected by the person, that they're not listening to you, alienated, or even some sort of you just want to get a reaction out of them or feel like you need to get back at them because they've hurt you in some sort of way. So it's not even really about the "you're not putting away the dishes when you said you were going to." You're making it personal when really that's not what the fight is about anyway.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So the thing is not the thing in a lot of cases. We're really fighting about something else entirely.

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: So when someone comes to you and you can tell that they really don't know how to fight -- do they ever fight in front of you in the office? Do you have to spray them with the fire extinguisher or anything?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Oh, yes. That does happen. But it's a matter of -- I mean, people really do have to learn how to fight fair. The first thing that people have to kind of look at is what have they been modeled? What did you learn about what fighting is about from your family? And so if you saw your parents fighting in this way then that's kind of what you're used to doing and you really have to have it brought to your attention in order to understand that that's what you're doing. Some people know that they're doing it and they're doing it to get a reaction, but a lot of times people just do it because they feel overwhelmed and it's not really purposeful.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. Now, do you feel like -- is it just me or do some people's spouses save up things for fights?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Yes. I think that does happen. I think that people sometimes feel that fighting is about kind of defending their side of an argument and that they bring up things that have happened in the past or they bring up personal kind of sensitive information about that person. And because there isn't open communication all along they kind of horde it up and then throw it back at the person.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what do you do about all this? How do you help people work through it?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, part of it is when people decided that they have more negative interactions than positive interactions, or if one person is really pulling away from the relationship then they decide to come into therapy. And so being able to help them take responsibility for their own behavior -- because ultimately we can't change what other people do; we can only change how we behave in an argument. And so just kind of coming to an agreement that, yes, both of us are contributing to this and agreeing not to use that kind of tactic in fights anymore. And then it's a matter of prevention, so learning tools for keeping disagreements calm kind of helps you from using that kind of information against each other.

Lee Rosen: So what sort of tools help people to keep things calm? What are you thinking about?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, it's really just basic kind of communication skills, so doing things like using active listening instead of defending your position or withdrawing from the fight. So for example, using clarifying or rephrasing what the person is saying. So basically, "Are you saying that you're really frustrated that I haven't put the dishes away?" So not putting words in the other person's mouth or not saying, "You're saying that I'm not doing my job."

Labeling your feelings or labeling the other person's feelings too. So, "You seem to be feeling frustrated," or "I'm really frustrated with what's going on right now." And then kind of validating their feelings that, "I can understand why you would be frustrated because we've had a discussion about this before," being able to do that type of thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so are you finding that you are sitting down with folks and literally practicing techniques like this with them?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Absolutely. People really have to learn how to use effective expression instead of trying to control the situations. They really have to learn how to state their own feelings, how to make requests that aren't demands, and how to set limits on what they're willing to accept from the other person without saying it in a nasty kind of way.

Lee Rosen: Right. What do you do if you're the spouse and you feel like the other spouse is really digging around, sort of looking around in that closet full of skeletons trying to find something they can use

against you and they're throwing that old stuff at you? How do you respond to that?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, I think the first step is having that agreement in place that you can say to each other, "I'm starting to feel like this is becoming personal." Because it gives the other person an opportunity to take a step back and say, "Okay, we've agreed not to do this." But a lot of times, again, people just aren't aware that that's what they're doing in the moment.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So the agreement in advance is really the key. So if you're going to have such an agreement, walk me through -- I want to go home tonight and I want to say to my wife, "Lisa, let's talk about this so that next time something comes up we can be better equipped to deal with it." What should that conversation look like?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, it's often helpful to have an example because when you try to make it too global than the other partner might not really be able to get on board. They don't know what you're talking about. So being able to use an example of, "So we had this fight. I feel like this information about me was used against me," or "I feel like I used this information about you against you in a fight. So let's talk about ways to not have that happen again and kind of come to an agreement that part of it's my behavior, part of it's your behavior, and then that we're not going to do that again."

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. So we have that conversation and let's assume it goes well and doesn't disintegrate into, "Why are you saying that I'm a terrible fighter?" But it goes well and now three nights from now there is an argument. Something is -- I haven't properly loaded the dishwasher or whatever. How do I reference that -- I assume we're going to kind of revert to the usual pattern and I want to go back and I want to acknowledge that we've had this discussion and we've got some sort of agreement in place. How do I do that without things melting down as they would normally?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, that's when you want to state your feelings about what's going on. So being able to say, "I feel like this is going down the road that we agreed that we were going to make a change in. I feel like this is getting person and I'd like to kind of start this over again. How do you feel about that?" So you're making a request rather than a demand and you're also stating what it is that you're experiencing in that moment, rather than saying the other person is doing something wrong. So rather than saying, "You're not

following the rules. You said we were going to do this," saying, "I'm feeling that this is what's happening right now."

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, let's assume that she just says, "Well, I'm an idiot and that was a dumb discussion we had three days ago." What do I do at that point?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, I think then it's time to have a conversation about really what are the kind of causes and the effects of intimidation, because a lot of times people are using not fighting fair in order to intimidate the other person and get what they want, and being able to talk about how that affects both of you. So sometimes people don't react the same way to that kind of situation. Based on what you're used to growing up, if you see your family fighting that way all the time you're feelings don't get as hurt as somebody whose family fought differently.

And so being able to talk about, "This is really something that's painful to me or harmful to me, even if it isn't to you, and that's why this is so important to me, even if it doesn't necessarily mean that you're reacting in the same way to it." And really just having that other person understand where you're coming from and kind of sharing what's going on with yourself.

Lee Rosen: You would agree that it's very difficult to go in the direction that you're advising when you're used to fighting unfair, right?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Absolutely. It takes practice. I think just like anything, when you're going to try to change your behavior in some sort of way it takes practice. And people are going to do it right and then they're going to do it wrong and then they're going to do it right and then they're going to do it wrong. And so it's a matter of being willing to go back and apologize and start over and say, "Okay, so what didn't work there? What happened that we ended up down that road again and what do we do to change that?"

Lee Rosen: Now, you're seeing a lot of people go through this and learn these skills. And I know that you guys as psychologists never want to tell us what's normal, but we all want to know what's normal.

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: So what's normal? If we're really committed to this but we're going back to our old stuff and doing it the old way, how long should it take us to get on track if we're trying to follow these rules? When do we give up, is what I really want to know?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, I would say that I don't know that anybody should ever give up. It's a matter of it's different for everybody. So how engrained is that pattern for you and do you do it with other people? It's going to take longer if that's how you communicate with people other than your spouse as well because then it's really engrained in your patterns with lots of different people. If you tend to only fight that way with your spouse then it's probably going to be a little bit easier to break because you have other skills in place already that you just have to generalize to your relationship with your spouse.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, is a person going to be able -- let's say someone listens to this podcast, gets some tips from you and they go and they start having these conversations. If it's just one spouse that really wants to fix this problem, it's not a team effort -- yet, anyway -- will that work or do you really need to get both spouses? I mean, I hear you; you've got to have an agreement. But aren't there families where you try to get that agreement and -- I mean, no one would say no the way you presented it. I think every spouse, "Oh, yeah. That sound good to me."

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: "That sounds great," right.

Lee Rosen: But aren't there people that just -- no matter what they've agreed to, every time there's an argument they're just not interested in the old agreement?

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Well, I think it has to be a matter of finding what's hurtful to both parties because if you only focus on the way that it's affecting you as the one part of the couple then the other person might not buy into it. So it's finding what do they find uncomfortable or really, really toxic when you guys are having fights and agreeing to work on that as well. So that way it's not just one person coming in and saying, "This is what I want and this is what's wrong with you." It's, "Let's look at our relationship as a whole. This is what I'd like to work on. What would you like to work on as well?"

Lee Rosen: Right. "Wouldn't you love it if I'd stop talking about your Great Aunt Sally?"

Katrina Kuzsyzyn-Jones: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: I have things to trade. Do you think people can do this on their own without coming to someone -- a psychologist or other professional? Do you need someone to coach you through it or are people able to sort of step back and do this without that kind of help?

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: I think it depends. I think that there are people who can. You get a couple of books on communication skills. If you both are really dedicated to making it work and you both really see that you're both part of the problem then I think you can do it on your own. You just kind of learn some new patterns and you work on it together. But I think, like you said before, a lot of the time it's that one person is seeing a problem and the other person is not really quite there yet that it's a problem that they want to fix. And I think that's when it's helpful to go in and kind of get that outsider point of view of, "This is what I'm seeing you guys do in your interactions," and coaching in that way.

Lee Rosen: Right. I guess really it does make a huge difference when you have somebody else there giving input and you're not just stuck with the two spouses telling each other what they believe is the truth or whatever.

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: So in your practice obviously you're seeing a lot of people -- I listen to you and it's clear to me you know these conversations. You're listening to them all day. Realistically somebody comes in and they've been married 10, 15 years and they're really engrained in a pattern of fighting not very fairly. Are you able to turn them around? And if so, how long does it take usually?

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Well, I mean, I've actually worked with a number of people who are getting ready to retire or are already retired. So they're far along in their marriage, they've been doing this for a really long time and maybe they've even been doing it with other people other than their spouse. And I think you can make changes as long as you're uncomfortable with the way that things are in that moment.

Some people get it right away and they kind of go, "Oh. That's all we need to do?" And they can do it in a couple of sessions. Some people need for three months. Some people need for six months. It's just kind of a matter of what other things are going on and is it just about this relationship or are there underlying -- like there's some depression or anxiety that's getting in the way of them being able to really move forward with what they need to do? Are there other things going on with financial concerns that are really always rising to the top? And being able to work on those things can take a little bit more time as well.

Lee Rosen: Are there people for whom it's just too late, that there really is nothing you can do?

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Well, I'd like to say no because I think that that's what my job is, is kind of helping people figure out -- even when they've been doing something one way for a really long time -- that there's a way that they can make that change. So I'd like to say that, no, I don't think it's too late as long as both people are willing to participate. I think when both people are not willing to participate and not really buying into it, then it's a more difficult process.

Lee Rosen: Right. But it sounds like you have a lot of success and that must be really heartwarming to see people walking out of your office knowing that now they are able to fight fairly. And they're going to fight anyway, but now they can do it in a way that's productive and healthy and allows their marriage to work out for them. I'm sure that feels very good for you.

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: It does. It's really nice.

Lee Rosen: That's great. Well, Katrina, I really appreciate you being here and sharing your thoughts on how to fight fairly. That is terrific advice. Thank you very much.

Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones: Well, thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: I'd like to thank Dr. Katrina Kuzszyn-Jones for joining us to discuss the impact of really using sensitive information in arguments, which is something that I'm sure all of us, unfortunately, have done at some point in the past; and helping us to learn how to fight fairly.

You can learn more about Katrina's counseling and therapy practice as the Lepage Associates website. That's LepageAssociates.com. We will of course put a link to that website in the show notes at StayHappilyMarried.com. You can also call her office. The number in Durham, North Carolina is (919) 572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. If you have feedback or comments about this show or any show give us a call on our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083, or shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to know how you think we're doing and we'd love to hear your suggestions about future shows. We're very interested in any feedback that you might have.

August 25, 2008 - Fighting Fairly

I'm Lee Rosen. Thanks for joining us. Until next time, stay happily married.

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