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Scoring Big on Valentine's Day

This is episode #100 of Stay Happily Married, "Scoring Big on Valentine's Day."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We're excited to be doing our 100th episode of *Stay Happily Married*.

My guest today is Dr. Michael Hall. Michael holds a Ph.D. in counseling psychology and a master of education in school psychology. His office is down in Charlotte, North Carolina with his wife Barbara. They counsel -- do private counseling, coaching, consultation services for individuals, for couples, for corporations. He's been with us before. I am excited to have him back.

Welcome to the show, Michael.

Michael Hall: Thank you, Lee. It's great to be back.

Lee Rosen: Well, this is a great -- it's perfect timing for our 100th episode to be talking about Valentine's Day. I suppose I'll just refer to you throughout the episode as like "Dr. Love," if that works.

Michael Hall: It's certainly seasonal.

Lee Rosen: Certainly seasonal. Exactly. Listen, you know, Valentine's Day. How important is Valentine's Day to most spouses? Is it really that big a deal?

Michael Hall: Yes and no. How's that for a typical psychologist answer?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: But there's a great deal of variability in terms of the importance of it as a holiday. And in that sense, it doesn't carry the same weight I think with many people that you might find with the more traditional was-religious but perhaps not now so-religious holidays that come around at the end of the year, beginning of the new year.

However, I do find that it is recognized fairly broadly as an opportunity to focus in on the marriage relationship, to do something to review it, to think about it, to talk about it. So in that sense I do find that it's fairly universal, though perhaps not carrying the same weight as a marriage anniversary or even a birthday anniversary.

Lee Rosen: So it falls a little bit -- so you need to put more weight on a birthday or an anniversary but this one still counts.

Michael Hall: It really does. It really does. I think in part because it is so pervasive in the environment. Some have wanted to blame the card companies for really creating another holiday in the sort of middle of the winter so that we don't have quite the crash that we do with the passing of the year-end holidays.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: So that notwithstanding, it is there as a time, again, to sort of focus on some matters of the heart.

Lee Rosen: Love and romance. Well, I know that if I forgot a birthday and if I forgot an anniversary I would be in big trouble. I mean, realistically, I am expected to delivery with a gift of some sort on a birthday or an anniversary. Am I going to get into big trouble if I don't buy a Valentine's gift?

Michael Hall: Lee, the biggest factor there is what is your marital -- what is your relationship history? What I see most frequently is, if in fact what was the practice during the bonding years or the bonding years -- or dating time; that may not even be a year -- if that had a -- if there was a big splash around Valentine's then and that has maintained for one or two years in the marriage and then it sort of, by neglect, has fallen off radar, you may have some downturns of the eyebrows or downturns of the mouth in terms of the expectation being there and then it being perceived as some suggestion that fires of passion aren't still there because it once was and now isn't.

But if in fact it never was during the early years of the relationship, even with the amount of attention that the popular media placed upon Valentine's Day, you're not likely to have a comment or a look of disappointment the day after.

Lee Rosen: It sounds like if Valentine's Day has become a big deal at your house, it's probably your own fault that you worked a little too hard during that dating period and you raised expectations. And now if you don't deliver, she's going to wonder where your heart has drifted off to.

Michael Hall: Exactly. Yeah. Once the expectation is created then there's some obligation to maintain it. Or if not -- and here's a back door -- is to make sure you talk about it. "Early on it was -- we kind of did these things; it was important. How about we not make a big deal about it this year so that when we take our late spring trip to Disney World just the two of us, without the kids so we can act like kids alone, that we can stay a little longer?"

So bring it up still a way in which it can change. So just because it once played a great place on the celebration calendar doesn't mean that you have to be held to it. But certainly not simply making a decision on your own and it appearing that it's a sign of neglect; that's where you get into big trouble pretty quickly.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you can. You can sort of reset expectations. Now, you know, it's interesting because as I listen to you -- and for me, I think I have set pretty low expectations for Valentine's Day. It has never been a big deal in our marriage.

But that almost lends an opportunity for me to score a bunch of points by -- since my wife expects nothing, not even a card. I think she'd be shocked by a card. I'm a true romantic. But if I showed up with the flowers and went all out, the nice dinner and the flowers, she'd either be blown away or assume I was involved with another woman and was feeling guilty.

Michael Hall: Exactly. And I mention that a lot to those of us that have heard or remember how husbands took it pretty hard on the cheeks there in the '90s for being sort of characterized as -- oh, how does the tee-shirt read? "Men or husbands: Some assembly required." And so we had that opportunity to -- where expectations are low is to come in and to actually -- as you said, to really score big by creating one.

In contrast to a birthday; you've got to acknowledge that even though you didn't have anything to do with creating that expectation in terms of the birthday. The same with respect even to

a wedding anniversary; I mean, you've got to have a pretty compelling reason to overlook that.

But to have a blank slate and just to on your own decide, well, here's a chance when we're going to focus upon us without it being triggered by some external event that is to be remembered, but in fact is an opportunity to really focus on us and what you mean to me and what our marriage means to both of us.

So you're right. I'd much rather encourage husbands to think about it as the opportunity versus, well, here's one of those things where -- you know, there's a lot to lose if you don't do something because everybody at work and -- my spouse is going to be asked, "Well, what did your husband do this time? What did Michael do this year?" "Well, I think maybe tomorrow he's going to do something because he didn't --"

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: And so you -- there's a lot to lose to not do something. And so then it becomes a -- it can feel obligatory and you don't now have the opportunity to have this great impact on the marriage as it could be.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'm already starting to see the flowers flowing into the office - - to women in the office.

Let me ask you this. So if you're a guy and you say, okay, I do want to go for it. I don't want to ignore this holiday. I'm going to get engaged. And maybe the expectations are not too high, but there are some expectations there. Do you see guys that think they know the right thing to do and the right gift or the right way to approach this and they're really completely off base?

Michael Hall: Yes. Yes. Off base in the sense of really missing the opportunity to make a heartfelt statement that is really perceived as it is in intended. In other words, there's one -- one of the leaders at church said we really mean well more times than we do well. And the same can be said not only in the church or synagogue but certainly in our marital relationships as well.

And so to simply say, "Well, I want to do something so I'll go out and -- oh, there's a nice red Valentine's stand there by the checkout counter; let me just pick out something." And so, yes, we think that simply doing something is better than doing nothing. And maybe making a decision based on the size of the card or the size of a number of chocolates in the container is going to have its intended effect.

So yeah, we can not have a kind of an outcome that would really be desired if we simply do the card and chocolate routine each year, almost as if, well, that's easy because you happen to be there when you're checking out.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: You almost have to be blind to not come across a card and a box of candy. But to really make a decision about what's going to be done - - not necessarily even given, but what's going to be done -- that's going to send the message that you matter the most to me. And if you start the question that way, you start the opportunity that way, then as men we can find ourselves being more creative. And that's how I really like to encourage men to think about it.

And if you're like me, a lot of men -- I mean, I've spent 30 years trying to figure this whole thing out called romance. What exactly does it mean? And I think about some of my early courses in the history of marriage in the Western world and so forth and it really didn't do much as well.

But here's what I'd learn and here's what I offer a lot of the men that I talk to both casually personally as well as in my practice is to think about romance equals nurture. How can you send the message that you want to nurture this primary relationship that you have with your wife?

I think once you start to translate it that way, that can make it easier to think about, well, what do I do other than the traditional card and the box of candy that has to get larger every year? Because after all, we're in our second decade of marriage; I can't get the same size card that I've been getting the first five years or the box of --

Lee Rosen: Right. After 30 years you'd have to drive up with a truck full of chocolate. Yeah.

Michael Hall: Almost. Yes. And then that runs the risk of being interpreted as some kind of a statement about, "Do you think I need to put on some weight?" or, "Are you trying to make up for having cheaped out at the year-end holiday or at our anniversary and so you're going to make up for it at --"

Lee Rosen: It's nice to hear your life is no easier than ours. Yeah.

Michael Hall: Oh, no. No. Yeah. So I like to encourage men to think about it as an opportunity to nurture.

Let me give this also to the husbands who are listening as well. If you think about, well, what does that mean to nurture, to show that I care and that I care that this relationship is more important than any other human relationship that I have the topside of terra firma, is to think about nurture as -- I call it the four A's of nurture; meaning, what can I do to show acceptance? What can I do to pay my wife the utmost of attention? The second A. The third A is what can I do, what can I say to affirm my wife? And then the final A, the one that we most often think about with romance, and that has to do with affection.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: So let's go back and take a look at each of those.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Each one. Acceptance is number one. What have you got on that?

Michael Hall: Yes. Acceptance. We commonly say -- I'll be colloquial for just a second, but we commonly say -- you've heard the statement, maybe you've heard your aunt or grandma say it growing up: People don't care what you know until they know what you care.

And so with acceptance -- and we do see this particularly as we look at some of the gender differences around how we express meaning in our relationships. But that almost universally we see that women really want to know that what they think, feel, and wish is understood. And so by acceptance, a synonym can be to understand. Not that we think it make sense, and certainly with the amount of testosterone still running in our veins, regardless as the decades flow and it decreases, we do look at and can experience the world in some ways that are significantly different if not profoundly different.

So when we talk about acceptance, when we talk about understanding it, to show that we get it. Or to say something like, "So you really are of the opinion that this recent discussion about the whole tea party really does mean this about what's going to happen in the next election." So to show that something that your wife has commented about or alluded to, that you understand that this is something that is important to her or has meaning to her. Not that you agree. So to, again, use this as an opportunity to show particularly something that is passionately held by your wife and perhaps may not be popular or may be something that is even controversial.

So again, you're going to score big when you take this as an opportunity -- again, maybe part of what you will do on a special meal, on a special dinner, is to come in prepared to make statements about acceptance that way.

Lee Rosen: And what you're saying with that is you don't have to agree with everything that you hear from your spouse but you have to acknowledge that you heard it, that you understood it, that you accept it.

Michael Hall: Absolutely. And I have continued to find that that's a real relief to make a difference between acceptance and agreement. And many times -- not most times -- once there have been significant, if not heavy, doses of acceptance showing that you understand how she thinks, feels, or is even afraid of a notion of an idea, that you get credit as if you agreed just because you've taken the time to say, "Yeah."

So from your side it looks like, smells like, tastes like A, B, C, D, and E and you can't imagine that anybody else would possibly think 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. And that's the kind of thing if you, again, watch women when they're together, why they gravitate toward each other is they give each other these large gifts of giving them their own experience back and acknowledging their thoughts and their feelings and their wishes and their fears, even if you don't agree to them.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So we made it through the first A, acceptance. What's attention all about?

Michael Hall: Sure. Attention is simply T-I-M-E. Time together alone.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: It's the idea, sure, I can multitask, I can work on -- "Oh, yes. I'm listening. I'm listening," and we're doing two or three other things. But it is the notion -- again, if we stay with the definition that romance equals nurture is that you are attending to this primary relationship, you're attending to this primary person with few, if any, distractions.

And so again, the Valentine creates an opportunity to say, what can I do? How can I communicate that when it comes to being together that I can pay primary attention to my wife? And so again, to be creative around that is an excellent way to nurture, to care around and to fertilize. How's that for a nice masculine way? To fertilize around your marriage. Don't say that, but we can talk about that

way as husbands, but I wouldn't suggest putting that in a card and saying I want to fertilize our --

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I want to -- right.

Michael Hall: Yes.

Lee Rosen: So put down the Blackberry, put away the iPhone, pay attention and you've made it through the second A. Third A, affirm.

Michael Hall: Yes. Yes. And what you're doing here -- let me just back up here a little bit. When you go back to the acceptance, what you're doing is showing regard for how your wife thinks. When you pay attention to her, you're saying that her physical presence means so much to you. When you're affirming, you're showing attention to her heart.

And so you're going to look for ways to, again, show appreciation for her delicate feeling. And so you might make a comment by -- boy, it really breaks your heart when you look at just the pace at which the world community is able to impact what happened in Haiti. So you're giving her back her feelings but you're affirming those feelings are observable to you and that because they are hers they have value.

Again, whether they make sense to us -- and many of the times they will not to us as men, but that has nothing to do with the fact that they are hers and they are very real. And again, we're showing that we care when we acknowledge verbally here on the affirmative side of the management.

Lee Rosen: Right. This is fantastic. And it totally works for my male brain. It's like, give me a checklist and I'll go do --

Michael Hall: Sure.

Lee Rosen: You know, it's perfect. Yeah. So acceptance, attention, affirm -- or affirmation. Now, finally, affection, the fourth A. What have I got to do?

Michael Hall: Sure. And you worded that correctly, Lee. When we think about affection we do often think about what do we have to do because here we're paying attention to the sensory experience, to the physical touch, to the tactile, to be a little more medical for just a moment.

And so here what we have to do is we have to first be intentional about that this is an important part of creating a nurturing

experience or a day where we're going to do some aspects of perhaps more than one of these, I'd recommend.

So when you think about affection, again, when you think about the exciting, the senses in general, we can think about fragrances. That's where the whole perfume side has come from, the olfactory glands. The fine meal and the favorite beverage again has to do with the taste buds as a sensory experience. For those who like physical motion, again, a walk in -- depending on where you live, a walk in the park or a favorite place. Outdoors in the moonlight can also be an affectionate kind of experience. So again, you're looking for that which is going to work in and around the sensory modalities. Favorite type of music is another aspect as well.

And so again, when we think about the traditional romantic setting, you can imagine how many of those senses often get brought into play. You come into the environment and the lighting is an aspect of it, the music, the ambiance -- we sometimes refer to it as -- is all an attempt to acknowledge or to excite the senses, in that sense.

So what we have to do is again to be mindful and think, "I wonder if I can get a couple of those sensories activated by --" then you plan the setting or you plan the event, that it might include a couple of those things well.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic.

Michael Hall: So what I recommend for men to do, to think about, is to sprinkle these around some. So again, move around from the, "Well, there's a chance I'm going to get the same card as last year, but wouldn't that be embarrassing? I don't remember what card I got last year." And not have to worry about it.

So let's think about moving away from the traditional card and box of candy and let's think about what are ways in which we can include some aspect of at least two -- I'm going to recommend some aspect of all four of those for the more ambitious husbands among us.

And again, have some fun with it. Have some fun thinking, let's see, what do I know about my wife now and what are some things that I can talk about or comment about to show that I'm accepting some of the things that are in her conversation recently that are of concern to her in her world?

What are some things that I can do to spend time with her? It may not be long, depending on the day, but it's something that I can do

to show that I like being in her physical presence just because of who she is.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Michael Hall: What are some things that I can say to show that I know that she has feelings about things that are very different than mine but that they are heartfelt? How can I acknowledge those? How can I pay attention to those, even if I don't own them as mine?

So what can I do in the area of being affectionate? What can I do in terms of showing tender touch -- is a good synonym. What can I do to show, again, the tenderness that often has a lot to -- health-wise feel like they are special?

Lee Rosen: Fantastic advice, Michael. I'll tell you what. You've given us a lot to act on and we don't have much time. So if we apply those four A's between now and Valentine's Day we're in good shape. So I appreciate you working it through with us. Thank you.

Michael Hall: You're very welcome.

Lee Rosen: It sounds like one of the --

Michael Hall: It's always a job.

Lee Rosen: -- one of the things we ought to do is all get together and warn all those guys that are out dating right now that they need to be careful about how high they set those expectations because they're going to have to live with them forever.

Michael Hall: That's right.

Lee Rosen: We should start a little campaign.

Well, listen, if you want to find out more about Michael's practice you can actually call them. Let me give you the number so you've got it. It's (704) 858-2984. He not only does individuals and couples counseling but he is renowned for his career counseling as well. Great stuff.

Thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for joining us all along on this adventure to 100 episodes. I hope that you will be back next week as we do episode number 101.

In the meantime, I hope you have a great Valentine's Day and if you have any comments or feedback we'd love to hear it. Our comment

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line is at (919) 256-3083 or you can shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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