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Keeping the Holidays Happy with Your Stepfamily

This is Stay Happily Married #133, "Keeping the Holidays Happy with Your Stepfamily."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. With the holidays quickly coming up, there's a lot on everyone's mind. And all that holiday planning can be twice as stressful for blended families. Where will everyone go? How will the time be split up?

We're here in the studio today with Barbara Keyworth, someone who's been on the show before. She's a licensed clinical social worker with a practice in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's got 23 years of experience.

On top of her own practice, she counsels high school and college-age students and has instructed at Duke University Medical Center and she's conducted a whole range of training programs. I'm excited to have her here to talk about stepfamilies and the holidays.

Barbara, welcome back to the show.

Barbara Keyworth: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: You know, you've had a lot of people that have come to you with blended families. And they come with the worries and the frustrations about the holidays coming up. What are the things that you're hearing over and over again?

Barbara Keyworth: Well, certainly everyone comes in with a deep longing to have a good time. And most people have a picture of what the holidays are going to look like, what the get-togethers are going to look like, and one of the first things I start to hear is a longing and disappointment. And so focusing on how are you going to enjoy the time that you have is part of what a new couple needs to do.

Lee Rosen: You say a picture. I mean, I really feel like having that picture is almost like -- I guess there's no way around that, but we get these pictures in our heads of what the holidays are supposed to look like and it's like we're just setting ourselves up for disappointment.

Barbara Keyworth: Well, you can't help but have some of the picture, but you can be more realistic about it. And one of the things that can actually help, if you have married someone and they have an ex-partner and perhaps you have an ex and you've got stepkids, one of the first things you can do is start talking about each other's picture of how they want the holidays to go.

I had someone recently and the woman said to the man, "What I really envision is, if we can't have the kids with us on Christmas morning, I picture us getting up together and having breakfast and opening our presents and turning the Christmas tree lights on and going for a walk."

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's very interesting because Norman Rockwell paintings of holidays never had stepparents or stepchildren in them, I guess.

Barbara Keyworth: That's true.

Lee Rosen: So what are the big root issues that are coming out here? What are the things that you're having to deal with all the time?

Barbara Keyworth: What shows up when people come in is a lot of frustration. What's behind that a lot is disappointment. So there's jealousy. In fact, you have to think about at the table you're going to have jealousy and anger and guilt and feeling left out and disappointment.

Lee Rosen: That does not go well with turkey.

Barbara Keyworth: That's right. That's right. And that's why all those great movies about what the Thanksgiving dinner's really like.

So starting to find out what each other's picture is is going to be helpful. And more than likely you'll have some differences in the pictures.

Lee Rosen: Right. But you're right. I think just asking "what is your ideal or what is it that you're hoping to get out of this" will really get the ball rolling. That makes a lot of sense.

When you have all this stuff going on in people's heads, how does it manifest itself? I mean, obviously people are not coming to you, I guess, until things are sort of feeling a little out of control. What are the things that people are walking into your office where you see, hey, this is the root of it is this holiday difficulty?

Barbara Keyworth: Well, and you make a good point. Everything I'm drawing on is based on families who are experiencing more of the turmoil. There are a lot of stepfamilies where people are really having a wonderful time and they have great bonds. They have found ways to get through a lot of the logistics and a lot of the negotiations and have arrived at a new way of doing things.

The anger and frustration shows up with a lot of questions, like, "Why do we have to give up our plans for that day for your ex to do what he wants?" Or, "It's our turn." Or, "When are we going to get our turn?" Or, "I hate the way we have to break up the day." Or, "You're not listening to me. I'm saying that this is what I want and look what happened last year." So it's a lot of angry, frustrated, and behind it disappointed comments.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Boy, it is interesting because you'd like holidays to be just wonderful and perfect and all that. And I think even in the best of circumstances it's -- when families really are working well together that it's still really, really challenging. It's got to be frustrating for you to be in the middle of all that.

Barbara Keyworth: It's typical of what goes on in families. It just gets heightened because you have more to negotiate. And the better someone is at finding out from his or her ex "what are you thinking of for the holidays" and "here's what we're thinking of," the bottom line is they have to share.

And so in a regular family, everybody has to share. But when you have blended families, there's an extraordinary amount of sharing that has to go on. And that's why people get so testy, because you never get -- you know, it's like before you have a child; you can read a whole book. When you have a child, you're reading five or six pages at a night. And you have to get used to this is the most I can get at this time. And that's some of what happens when you're having to divide the time among so many people.

Lee Rosen: Right. You're right. It's just a new reality.

I want to ask you about some things that people can do to try and negotiate this and make it go smoothly. But before I even get into sort of the big picture, one thing that I see a lot of people doing is they'll have their -- so you've got ex-husband and ex-wife having to deal with these kid issues. But they will let their new partners -- or at least one of them will let their new partner -- be the person having the discussion with the ex. Is that a bad idea or a good idea?

Barbara Keyworth: I think it is wonderful when you have an ex-wife talking to the stepmom. When that works, it is so good and I highly encourage it. Unfortunately, there are a lot of families where that just doesn't happen. Or the dad and the new stepdad don't get along. But I think the more they can do together is better because it's better for the kids. What the kids see is, wow, these adults are able to work things out even when they have differences.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Interesting. And some of the friends that I have where I've watched it happen, it feels like the new spouse, while they may have their own emotional issues aimed at the ex-spouse, they just don't have that history. And so it does feel like the conversations go a little more smoothly and don't sort of disintegrate into the old arguments that the two former spouses used to have.

Barbara Keyworth: Some of that has to do with appreciating each other. If each person is appreciating what the other person does and sometimes says, "I really appreciate what you do for my children," or "I really know that it must be hard for you as a mom to have to go through this; I'll do whatever I can to help you -- we'll do what we can to help you," that goes a long way.

And it takes me to my main point, which is you need a tremendous amount of empathy. As a starting place for couples on this is working on the empathy will help solve a lot of the conflicts.

Lee Rosen: So that's sort of the place where you encourage your clients to start is I guess sort of putting themselves in the shoes of the other person? Is that what you mean when you say "empathy"?

Barbara Keyworth: I am frequently saying to people, "You can understand, can't you, what this must be like for her? She was looking forward to spending time this way and now all of that has gotten turned upside down. You can understand how that must feel, right?"

Lee Rosen: Do they agree? Say, "No, I don't understand."

Barbara Keyworth: Well, and then that's where I say, "Well, you know what? You need to understand. So let's work on you understanding what each of you are going through."

And one of the biggest ones I see is a lot of dads, they will say, "I just want to spend some time with my kids. I just want to go throw a football with them or take them out to the park or have them at the house." And the mom may be feeling -- or the stepmom may be feeling like, "Yeah, but what about all these other things?"

And so I'm saying, "Okay. But let's go back to this is very important to him. You can understand he just wants some peaceful time that's fun with his kids. Let's see what we can do to make that happen. Because you'd like to have it nice too."

Lee Rosen: Right. So there's a lot of focus on the things that are going to be lost by not having the time, it sounds like, like that throwing the football.

Barbara Keyworth: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Is that kind of where people spend a lot of their energy is feeling bad about that?

Barbara Keyworth: The losses are huge. You have to divide the time. And a common pattern -- and I'll use Christmas, since that's such a common one where people are saying, "Okay. So we want the child on Christmas Eve and then their mom wants her on Christmas morning. So that means we have to leave at 9:00 on Christmas Eve to get her back over to her mom's house and that totally disrupts our day." So you have to learn how to have good times in small fragments and that's very tough for people.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It really -- I just think it's hard to sort of translate what your picture of the holiday is into that sort of little pieces. It just doesn't -- I think reality and ideas about what's going to happen are so often in conflict with one another.

What do you do? What are some of the positive steps, the things that you help people to do to kind of not feel like they're experiencing so much loss as they work their way through this?

Barbara Keyworth: Well, they have to look at how to create an oasis of times together that are good. And it's going to be in smaller segments. So if what you end up with is you have your children for Christmas morning and then they go over to your ex-husband's house that day, later in the day, you have to really enjoy the time that you have right there

and you have to make it nice for the kids. And you have to focus on that and really focus in on the moment. And that requires a lot of flexibility too because you're having to adjust and get away from the picture of "I like to have them here for two whole days."

Now, sometimes families can work it out or they trade off years. But if you're having to move kids around between your ex, your house, your parents, and your new wife's parents and then your ex's grandparents, I mean, it's huge.

And so being flexible about, okay, maybe we'll start the holiday two weeks in advance; we'll go to these people's house over New Years; keeping a sense of humor and listening to each other about, okay, what's most important to you? If there's only three things we're going to get to do, what would you like to do with the time?

Lee Rosen: Right. Very practical advice. And it sounds like you're helping people sort of create new pictures and not be stuck in those old models. Because when you talk about two weeks, it's like, I think we're all so stuck on -- for instance, with Christmas, it's all about Christmas morning.

Barbara Keyworth: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: And you're really opening up opportunities in our thinking and expanding the possibilities by giving us broader pictures. I mean, I think that just is tremendously helpful. Because without your help it is easy to get stuck in our old images.

Barbara Keyworth: Well, and a lot of times one of the other problems that occurs is we discovered that our kids were having two rather large Christmases. They were getting an extraordinary number of presents. So we were able to collaborate some with their mom to say, okay, we really don't want the kids to be getting two giant Christmases. Can we work out something reasonable for both? And that helped a lot because they were starting to expect a giant Christmas from two families.

Lee Rosen: Right. Boy, yeah. I'm guessing a lot of kids would be thinking, "Hey, how do I get more families?"

Barbara Keyworth: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: This is not all bad. Two big Christmases. Yeah.

Barbara Keyworth: Uh-huh.

Lee Rosen: No, very interesting. Now, we've talked a lot about the concerns and the frustrations of holidays with stepfamilies, but I'm wondering if there's any sort of upside to this. Are there things that stepparents and their spouses can look forward to?

Barbara Keyworth: Oh, sure. And truly, I see a lot of people coming in -- often they're college students -- who are saying, "You know, I have a great stepdad," or "I love going to visit my dad and his new wife; we all get along really well. And then I go and I visit my other parent and we have a great time there too." And I see the parents saying, "You know, there've been some really hard times but we really all love each other."

One of the benefits for the new couple is you get kind of a holiday -- I call it the holiday empty nest, when you might have stretches of time where you don't have any kids at home. Now, if you have kids at home full-time, you don't get that very often. So it gives you time to focus in on your relationship and go do something together that you might not get time to do when you have a house full of kids.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And you can look at that not as, boy, look at what we're losing; but you can try and look at it as, hey, look at what we're gaining. That is a much better, much healthier perspective, I suppose.

Barbara Keyworth: I usually recommend that people sit down with each other maybe even in October and start talking about, okay what do you want for the holidays? And hear each other's list of what they want. And then somebody has to make the call to the exes and say, "What are you thinking about? What are the things that you need to get done?" And it's a lot of negotiating.

And so doing that and being flexible and keeping a sense of humor can go a long way. And just realizing that everybody is frustrated and disappointed.

Lee Rosen: A lot of families with stepfamily relationships, blended families, have -- they have trouble all year long; it's not just at the holidays. But it does sort of feel like if you can get the holidays down, it seems like it's a lot more likely that the rest of the year will fall into place.

Barbara Keyworth: I think the holidays are the toughest. We all bring in these deep emotional feelings about the holidays, a lot of poignancy, a lot of joy, a lot of wishes, our own disappointments from things that happened growing up. And it feels like a chance to have a really nice time. The same things happen around vacation. It's like you want to go on vacation.

And I have to say, I think men are often quite good at really focusing in on enjoying the moment. A lot of times when I'll ask dads -- the weekend and all the time up to it might have been really hard to arrange, but when I say, "So what did you do?" He says, "You know, I had the best time hanging out in the kitchen and helping them on the computer and it was really nice." And so sometimes that focusing in on the moment, as opposed to so much of the big picture, actually can help.

Lee Rosen: Well, I feel like we're talking about this at the right time of year. Hopefully we'll have some folks that'll listen to this and think, gosh, we really can make our holidays a lot better than they might have otherwise been.

So I appreciate, Barb, you taking the time to talk us through all of this. Thank you so much.

Barbara Keyworth: Thanks.

Lee Rosen: If you're looking for more information about this topic or about Barbara, you can check out Barb's website at BKeyworth.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that you can check it out. You can find out all sorts of things there, including information about her counseling services, her qualifications. Let me give you the number for Barb's office as well, (919) 783-8004.

Thank you so much for listening today. You know, we really appreciate all of the feedback you give us about these shows. Terrific ideas for upcoming episodes and lots of good advice. So if you will keep that coming, we will be very grateful.

Couple ways you can reach us. One is we have a comment line set up where you can reach us at (919) 256-3083. We have an answering message there where you can leave a recording. We also have e-mail for comments at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. So please keep in touch and let us know what we can do to keep helping.

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

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