

Stephanie: This is Episode number 168 for Stay Happily Married: Why Couples Need To Eat, Sleep and Play Together.

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Stephanie: We all have busy schedules filled with appointments, work, children's activities and even family events. And no matter how much we seem to get done, we can't seem to muster any more free time. This lack of time can begin to affect our families and even our spouse.

Dr. Kristen Wynns joins us to discuss why you should always make time to do three things with your spouse - eat, sleep and play. Dr. Wynns holds a doctorate and master's degree in clinical psychology and is a licensed psychologist. She is founder and owner of Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina. Dr. Wynns is experienced in individual, family, group, play and couples therapy.

I'm Stephanie Lockwood and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show, Kristen. I'm so glad you could join us. Kristen: Thank you.

Stephanie: Perfect. All right, Kristen. So you have these three things, and let's go on to the first one. Why is it so important that we eat together?

Kristen: Well, for couples and for families, meal time is a great opportunity to share nourishment and have connection with each other. It's really a great time to communicate and touch base about how everyone's day went. It also shows that family and your spouse is a top priority and that you've carved out that time to sit down and share a meal with them. It's very important for those reasons. And there is, of course, a side note since I work with a lot of kids. There's great research that shows that meal time is a protective factor for kids and teenagers. It's fascinating all the things that meal time has been linked to with kids, such as having better grades, they are less likely to have substance abuse problems and are less likely to get into trouble. It's just great for couples and for families.

Stephanie: Especially related to couples, what other positive consequences come from sharing meals together?

Kristen: For couples in particular, it can be a great time just to spend low-key, enjoyable time with each other, to plan the meals or to come up with the menu together, or to prepare the meals. Even sort of cleaning up afterwards, although most of us don't like that.

Stephanie: Exactly.

Kristen: That part, if you're doing it together, can be a nice time to sort of relax and chat while you're cleaning up. Just to have that downtime with your spouse is also a benefit of sharing a meal together.

Stephanie: We hear things about, you know, families are always so busy, they're always on the run. They're coming home, they're tired, they stop by and pick up something like fast food. Obviously when you're eating at home you're going to be eating something different, so eating with your family, or even with just your spouse if a family isn't in the picture, can lead to healthier meals, correct?

Kristen: Theoretically, that should be the case. We all probably fall prey to sometimes buying convenience foods for home, too. But certainly I think eating meals at home oftentimes results in healthier and more well-balanced meals. That's another benefit, certainly, that what you're eating is oftentimes more nourishing if you plan the meal to eat at home.

Stephanie: Okay. So are there any tricks to actually having a successful family meal time? Because sometimes things don't always go the way you plan them.

Kristen: That's right. I think that sometimes parents or couples feel pressure and get stressed out trying to carve out a time. So I think it's okay to have a moderate goal for the couple or family to say, "Hey, let's aim for three or four times a week that we are all definitely going to look at our calendars and find a good night that works for everyone."

With as busy as families and couples are, it's great to even just establish an actual meal time, to say, "Okay, tonight you'll be home from work at this time and I'll be home then. Let's plan on eating at 6:30." Just establishing it verbally or even putting it on the calendar helps couples remember to make it a priority, and also to not get overwhelmed with planning an elaborate meal. Just having a simple, healthy meal that doesn't involve a lot of time to prepare makes things easier, too.

I'm always a fan of having ground rules when you're having a meal, too, especially if there are kids in the mix, and unfortunately even adults and couples now are prone to glancing at a phone or checking e-mail real quick. So it's nice to have the ground rules, like, "Hey, we're going to turn off our electronics and we're going to put our cell phones in another room, and just really enjoy conversation with each other on light topics." You know, nothing heavy-duty, no problem-solving or nagging. Just enjoying chit-chat about each other's days.

Stephanie: You said 'no nagging'. Would that mean only light conversation, conversation not relating to one's personal life, or what do you usually suggest for these dinner times?

Kristen: I think anything goes as long as it's positive. If you have a problem to solve or a complaint or a criticism, there are other times that you can sit down and say, "Hey, these things are bothering me." But meal times should try to be preserved just for light chit-chat to talk about what's going on at work, what the plans are, you know, what's going on with friends and other family. Anything that's kind of a light topic is fine.

Stephanie: And it makes sense, because I know that whether you have kids or you're just in a relationship, people get busy. You get busy with work and you're overwhelmed, and you have to eat. Everyone has to eat. So it seems to make sense

to make that little bit of effort to coordinate ahead of time and do those necessary activities together.

Kristen: That's right.

Stephanie: So the next necessary activity that you had mentioned was sleeping. Why is it so important to sleep together in the same bed?

Kristen: I think many people, when they hear 'sleeping together' for couples, automatically think of sex. While that's important, the actual act of sleeping together with your spouse is very important, too. There are some pretty cool studies that show if you're married, you end up spending a third of your life sleeping with your partner. That's a long time. And although you're technically unconscious and you might wonder why this would be important. It's actually linked to many benefits for the individual in the relationship as well as the couple. It's an important time, and just that act of sleeping together can reflect the health of the marriage or it can contribute to the health of the marriage.

Stephanie: I think these are obviously more recent studies, because when I think of episodes of *Leave It To Beaver*, you had the parents who slept in the same room but they always slept in twin beds. So sleeping together in the same bed is something relatively new, within the last 50 years, and actually socially respectable. And now there have to be studies about sleeping together, the advantages of sleeping together, or sleeping apart. What are some of these benefits and the consequences of this?

Kristen: The benefits of sleeping together are, first of all, just communication and being able to catch up. Sadly, just because of how busy we are, many couples find that that few minutes while you're lying in bed before you fall asleep, is one of the few times in the day where you can chat about your days and spend some quality time talking. So just from a connection standpoint that time is important.

It's also linked to increased intimacy, increased pleasurable activities. Of course, you're going to have better odds of having sex if you're sleeping together, but just other pleasurable activities of just spending time together, cuddling, maybe giving a back rub. Those kinds of things are more likely to happen if you're going to bed at the same time. And it's also a good time for couples to feel comfortable and connected with each other. So many, many benefits. And as I referenced before, sometimes if your marriage is suffering or if you're having marital problems, the first thing that goes is sleeping together. Sometimes that's a barometer for the health of the marriage. If couples are having difficulties, they might purposely sleep in different rooms, different beds, or just stagger the bed times so that they don't have to go to bed at the same time. So it can also reflect problems in the marriage.

Stephanie: OK. With married couples with young children, you sometimes have the children coming into the bed. Either they can't sleep on their own or they're afraid of something. If you always have a child who's kind of 'in the bed' with you, does that have any effect on a relationship?

Kristen: For sure. And there are some interesting studies showing that married

people with children get less sleep than married people without children. I think any of us who have kids can completely understand why that is so.

Stephanie: Oh, yes.

Kristen: There are many issues that are real factors that get in the way of couples sleeping together and enjoying that time. Kids coming in is a big one. If you have a child who insists on sleeping with a parent, sometimes the other parent will say, "Well, I'm not coming in because the bed's already full." That's a hurdle many couples struggle with.

Other factors might be one partner snoring, which can really be disruptive, having different sleep cycles where one person doesn't get tired until 1:00 a.m. and the other one's exhausted at 10:00, or health issues like sleep apnea or restless leg syndrome. All of those are real issues that couples have to overcome, that make it more likely to retreat to their separate beds or even separate bedrooms.

Stephanie: Now with everything that could happen - snoring, kids coming to the bed - do you have any advice for couples who want to improve their habit of actually going to bed together?

Kristen: Yes. I think I would start with the easier things to tackle, just from a problem-solving standpoint. Certainly, if it's a health issue, go see your doctor. There are great things you can do for sleep apnea, for snoring, for restless leg syndrome. So if it's something like that, seek medical help. That can definitely help.

If it's a comfort issue, then brainstorm how you can make the bed comfortable for both of you. Maybe you need to get more covers for one side of the bed or different pillows, or put in a fan for somebody who's always hot. Just looking at the actual physical space of the bed and bedroom can sometimes help couples feel more comfortable. Similar to what I referenced for meal times, it might be too ambitious to say, "We have to go to bed together every night." But to have a moderate goal of, "Hey, let's try to go to bed together at least two or three times a week, and plan, "Okay. Tomorrow night, let's both try to head to bed at the same time." That can help, just to have a moderate goal.

I'm a big fan of spooning, which is something that sort of sounds silly. But it's really interesting that all the research shows how important spooning is. That's the position where you sleep like you're nested together like spoons. There's interesting research that shows that this sleeping position is linked to lower stress for each individual, it increases intimacy, and it really has a physiological effect of relaxation and comfort to sleep that way.

So I think even to say, 'Hey, let's remember to try to cuddle,' sometimes if you've been married for a while you retreat to each corner of your bed, and you like to have your own space to kind of flop around. But even to start off the night spooning for a few minutes is linked to great things for the relationship.

Stephanie:Awesome. So we've had eating and we've had sleep, which are two very essential things. Now we have play. What exactly is playing, and why is it so

important?

Kristen: It's funny to talk about adults playing because sometimes we get in this mindset that play is just for kids. But there is great research to show that happier couples report that they're happy because they have a lot of fun together. And it's a shame, as couples get busier and have kids, they get into sort of an auto-pilot of work, feed the kids, check your e-mail, and go to bed. People forget about how important fun is for relationships.

John Gottman has a great ratio that he always recommends of having five positive interactions to wipe out every one negative interaction. That's always a helpful rule of thumb for couples to keep in mind. If they're feeling stressed or if they've had an argument, or things just aren't going well, they should think, "Gosh, I need five positive interactions to wipe out the effects of the one negative." So planning something fun to play together is a great way to add more positive interactions to your relationship.

Stephanie: What types of activities should couples participate in when they're playing together?

Kristen: There's a great article that came out in The New York Times about reinventing 'date night' for couples who have been married for a long time. It was very interesting because these studies found that couples who spent time together having novel and different experiences had much greater increases in their marital satisfaction.

In other words, yes, going out on a date is great and important for the relationship, but the type of date that you go on can really make a difference in increasing your marital satisfaction even more.

The key factor was the novel and different experiences. Dinner and a movie, not so much. It would need to be a new experience that's really going to activate that part of the brain that releases the feel-good neurotransmitters. When we fall in love we've got those neurotransmitters just floating around in our brain like crazy. But as we go on and get comfortable with a partner, we need new experiences to kind of release those chemicals in the brain again. So exciting date nights where you're doing something new and maybe getting out of your comfort zone a little bit are great.

Stephanie: Do you have any suggestions for venues or activities where couples could do things that aren't usual, like dinner and a movie?

Kristen: Yes. Definitely if you're kind of an active couple, there are great things where you can go to a rock wall climbing place. 'Hot yoga' is a thing everyone's talking about now and I'm kind of fascinated with it, although I haven't done it myself.

Go take a new class together that you've heard something about. They have some indoor sky-diving places that are exciting to do together as a couple, or zip lining. Even getting something at home that's kind of new. You can get a punching bag and say, "Hey, let's learn how to do kick-boxing together," and get a DVD and watch that for a fun night together. If you're more of the not-so-active, artsy type, go take a new

art class together, or do one of the classes where you can drink wine and paint at the same time. You know, have a teacher show you how to paint. Those are getting to be popular and are a fun new thing.

You can push your limits of comfort and go to a improv comedy place or karaoke, and get up on the stage together, or alone, and do your thing. So if you brainstorm, there are great things that couples might be interested in that can have that novel, exciting feel to them.

Stephanie: This happens to everyone in kind of every situation in life, just like if could for meal time. How do you keep things positive? How do you keep from turning a fun activity into something that's not the activity that you had planned?

Kristen: Right. That would be probably a worst case scenario, to be fighting when you're on a zip line, right? That would probably not be a good combination.

It's great for couples to establish before they go out, to say, "Hey, let's really protect this fun time from conflict." Just state it explicitly before you go out. You know, "Let's keep tonight, or today, light. I know we have this or that problem that we are talking about, but let's really protect this fun time."

To state that in advance is helpful, but if someone forgets or slips up and sort of starts to talk about something that might be a conflict area, just to have the other spouse say, "Hey, can we table that issue? Remember, we're going to try to keep today fun. Can we table that and talk about it tomorrow over breakfast or talk about it tomorrow when the kids have soccer practice?" Just to acknowledge it but to stay focused on enjoying each other's company.

Stephanie: Great advice. Kristen, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today and being on the show. To find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns you can always visit her site at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. We'll have a link to that in the show notes. And you can always book an appointment by calling her office at 919-467-7777.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you so to comment on this or any other episode, you can call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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