

Lee: This is Episode Number 185 of Stay Happily Married: An Appetite for Love.

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

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Are your intimacy issues to blame for those extra pounds that you've put on? Our guest today will let us in on how the ups and downs of our relationships can impact our eating habits as well as how to prevent those unnecessary binges.

Karen Koenig is an expert on the psychology of eating. For over 30 years Karen has been working to help troubled eaters who have been stuck in a cycle of dieting and binging. She helps them break free and access a healthier lifestyle that will keep them on a healthy weight for the rest of their lives.

Karen has a double Masters in education and in social work. She's an international author of four books that focus on eating and weight, including "Nice Girls Finish Fat" and Karen's free Facebook app called APPetite, which will be available online this month.

Welcome to the show, Karen. I'm so glad you could join us.

Karen: I'm delighted to be here today.

Lee: We all have to eat. We all get that. But when is it that eating turns from ordinary to being abnormal or excessive?

Karen: One thing that can happen is people can restrict their eating to try to be a certain weight or try to maintain it a certain way. That leads to one kind of food problem. Another is when they don't pay attention to appetite cues and they eat beyond the fuel needs for their body. I call it people want to do regulated eating. There's dis-regulation on either end of the spectrum.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. When we're dating, people try to look their best. They want to be attractive. And then they get married. Does that whole idea of maintaining your weight end or change because of the relationship, or how does the marriage impact all of that?

Karen: It impacts in a couple ways. Let me first lay out the idea that we don't want to eat a certain way or be a certain weight for other people. Mental health really involves doing it because it feels right for you. If you're doing it for other people, it can be a problem.

One thing that happens when people get married is that they feel, "Oh, I can let down my guard. I can eat what I want now." But that relates to the other person. It's not, "I want to eat healthily because it makes me feel good and it's good for me."

It really also depends on the partner. I don't think there's a 'one-size-fits-all' answer to your question.

Lee: I'm curious about this because I think I do this a little bit. Do you see people who are eating differently when they're with their spouse than when they're off at work or doing their own thing and their spouse is not around?

Karen: The population that I primarily treat is people who overeat or what I call 'unwanted eating'. They may not overeat, they may just eat all day long. Those people tend to eat smaller amounts or reasonable amounts when they're with a partner or when they're with their family, but there is a lot of secret eating that's going on. Maybe it's during the day, maybe it's up in the bedroom at night or watching TV.

That really happens frequently, and for your audience, whenever there's a secret kind of eating, eating that you're ashamed of doing in front of other people, that's really a signal that something's not right.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. You know yourself. I think we all know when we're doing that sort of thing that things are not headed in a good direction. What is the impact of weight on the relationship? For people who are having difficulty with weight, how is that impacting their feelings about the relationship, about intimacy, about sexuality? How does that all play out?

Karen: Again, it varies from couple to couple. If both people are heavy, it may not enter into the issue at all. Intimacy may be fine. There's a program on TV, I think it's called "Mike and Molly". I haven't seen it but I've caught the tail end of it. They both seem very happy together, even at what we may call 'above-normal weight'. More often, one person has an eating problem. I call it that rather than a weight problem because you can be overweight and fit and fine or you can be normal weight and not fit.

If one person has an eating problem and the other doesn't, and that person puts on weight, they can often feel ashamed. They can be so unhappy with their bodies that they lose sexual desire. They don't want the light on. They just live in shame in their body, so the last thing they want to do is take off their clothes and be intimate. It is really a huge issue in many relationships. I'm glad you brought it up because it's not talked about a lot.

Lee: I agree with you. I just don't think this is one of the hot topics. When we talk about food we really do talk about so many other issues, but the impact on the relationship generally, and on sexuality specifically, is really not very discussed.

Let me ask you this. We all know when we're doing the wrong thing. Like you're saying, if we're doing secret eating, we're keeping it a secret because we know that we're not doing what we ought to be doing. What the heck is it about us? You're an expert on what we think and how we feel about things. What is the deal? Why do we rebel against these things that we know would be good for us? Why don't we do the right, healthy thing?

Karen: We'll do a little role-play and we'll figure out why. If I say to you, "Lee, do this." How does that make you feel?

Lee: It makes me push back. I'm like that. It's just is my reaction to that, big time.

Karen: That's most people's reaction. We hear so much of that when we're children that when we get older, when we're adults, we can finally say no. "No, you can't make me. No, don't tell me what to do." So what starts out as an interpersonal problem, particularly in childhood if we are bossed around a lot, if things aren't fair, if they're very arbitrary, if we don't have control, we have to sit with our "No" feeling.

Let's say our parents are no longer around. They live in another place, they don't have any power over us or maybe they are deceased. As adults we are still playing at this battle except it's no longer interpersonal, between persons. It's what's called intra-psycho, between us and us. There's a part of us saying, "Why don't you not have a second piece of cake because you are full and you enjoyed the first piece." Then there's another part of us saying, "You can't tell me what to do," except we're only hurting ourselves. That's a lot of what happens.

Another is something that's called the Boomerang Effect, which has been studied with smoking. That is when you give people constant information and lecture them about, for instance, smoking or eating, they just tune out. They say, "I'm just not listening anymore. I'm going to do what I want to do." This is a little bit different. It's being on overload and shutting down. Between that and the rebellion, a lot of that is going on with eating.

Lee: But I'll tell you, and nobody's listening to your message. We get barraged constantly with this, "Don't do this. Don't do that," from the media and everybody else. You're right, we're all pushing back.

I don't know. It's a little frustrating. I think you have your work cut out for you with helping all of us to straighten this out.

Karen: I do, and I would say that probably 80 to 90% of the people I've worked with, and I've been doing this work for over 30 years, end up with the idea of either shutting down or fighting back. However, I will say once they understand that they're only fighting themselves, it enables a shift to stop being so angry and stop fighting back. The good news is that understanding this and working with it, you can change.

Lee: Right. You're the only one that you're hurting in this situation. That is really enlightening when you hear that message.

They say that opposites attract and I've seen that in a lot of couples. What happens when you have one partner who really is a healthy eater and has great eating habits but the other one doesn't? Do you end up with two people who resent one another or do one's habits rub off on the other? Does one change the other?

Karen: Again, it depends on the nature of the relationship. Very often, as happens when there's a substance abuser, drugs or alcohol, in a relationship, the other partner becomes an enabler. "Oh honey, please don't do that. Oh, do you really want that?" Rather than have the person struggle themselves, which is what they need to do to build the emotional muscle to regulate their eating, the other person gets involved and then of course they're involved in a rebellion situation of, "Don't tell me what to do," or feeling you've disappointed your partner.

Whenever the motivation for change is external, it doesn't work. You can't change for a partner. It might motivate you, but the goals have to be your own. "I want to do it for me because it's self-care, because it makes me feel better." In other couples, nothing is said, but that doesn't mean that people don't have feelings about the way another person eats. Still other couples, there's sabotage. I hear this so often. The partner will say, "Gee, you've put on a little weight," and then they'll go out to eat, and the partner will be saying to the person who's trying to watch their weight, "Oh, try this, try this. Have you tried that?"

There are a couple different reasons for sabotage. One of them is often that we're more comfortable with someone who doesn't look what we might call 'the standard of attractiveness', which in this culture is pencil-thin, because we feel safer. There are a lot of very interesting dynamics that go on. Also, if one partner is overweight and the other one says, "I'm going to lose weight," maybe there's an activity that they do together a lot. I hear, "But we go out a lot together. We love to go out for dinner." One person

says, "I don't want to go out to dinner so much," or, "I want to go to the salad place," and it can change the intimacy in the relationship unless they find other things to do together.

Lee: This is a really hard topic for one spouse to talk to the other about. If I go to my wife and say, "Hey honey, you're looking a little fat," I'm not going to get a very good reception. That's not going to work. It's going to cause me a lot more trouble than it solves. How do couples talk about this? How do you have a conversation without it turning into an argument or an upset?

Karen: I'm going to do something I don't often do. I'm going to plug a book that's not mine. It's called "Honey, Does This Make My Butt Look Too Big?" It's published by a wonderful publisher, Gurze Books. It's a great book. It's how to talk about weight issues in a couple. It's "Honey Does This Make my Butt Look Too Big?" and people can find it on Amazon. I would refer them right to that. It's a great little book.

How else do we talk about it? The best way is from a position of curiosity. Not control, but expressing caring and asking questions. "What can I do to make this easier for you? What are the things that I do that present problems to your eating? What are the things that I could do that make it easier for you to eat according to appetite?"

There's a technique called motivational interviewing which is used a lot in therapy and other clinical settings. It's great. We tend to tell people what to do, when really we want to ask questions to get information, and then we create a contract together.

Lee: I like that. Approach it from curiosity. That's very good advice and I can definitely apply that. Doing it the way you suggest really doesn't sound like it would promote or provoke confrontation. That makes a lot of sense.

Karen: The other thing is to understand how complex this issue is. We have just heard for decades, "Just say no," and, "Why can't people have self-discipline?" This is not about self-discipline. It's not about willpower. We really need to let go of that whole idea and understand that there's a biological piece to weight.

I have read research that says 50 to 70% of our weight is genetically encoded. That means you have 30 to 50% in lifestyle to play with. If people have had trauma in childhood, any sort of abuse, any kind of stressful childhood, that puts them at much higher risk for having eating problems. We have very different kinds of metabolisms.

The other thing that makes it difficult is that we live in the most fat-phobic, thin-obsessed culture in the history of the world. The more pressure we put on our bodies to be thin, the more we diet, the more it dis-regulates appetite and promotes weight gain for a number of biological and psychological reasons. Having a respect for how complicated this is really goes a long way in couples dynamics.

Lee: Boy, it is complicated, too. Everything I read feels to me like they keep figuring things out but they don't have good answers for in this arena. It never gets simpler. It seems to get more and more complicated all the time.

I love the curiosity approach. What other tips do you have for couples that are trying to work together? How should they approach the situation in order to make this marriage healthier?

Karen: A lot of it depends on what kind of relationship they have. This is very hard if one partner is ashamed, does the 'blame and shame' bit and tries to control the other partner. That kind of person doesn't do well in these kinds of conversations. Because they're judgmental, it's hard for them to be kind and compassionate and curious. If you do have a partner who is like that, it's going to be more difficult.

I think education is important, and understanding what makes people eat the way they do. Again, asking questions. Have a dialogue that is not about somebody being right or wrong. It's just another issue in married life, and maybe making some joint decisions together that are win/win. "We'll go out to eat once a week, not twice. And we won't go to the buffet. We'll cook home more. We'll try to cook together. We'll do more marketing together."

It really depends on what the issues are. It's also important for both people to get support. Hopefully, the person who has an eating problem is able to talk to friends about it or to a professional. And the person who is with someone with an eating problem is able to talk to somebody, also, to say, "Wow, it's really hard to support my partner/husband/wife. I'm struggling with ways to do this." We tend to feel we have to do this stuff in isolation and we don't want to talk to other people about it. That's really the worst thing we can do, is be quiet.

Lee: Excellent advice. I mentioned your book in the intro, "Nice Girls Finish Fat", but I'm also curious about your new Facebook app that's coming out, and we're all on Facebook of course, called APPetite. What is APPetite all about? What's that going to do for us?

Karen: I'm excited about APPetite. It will be out in the next week or two. It is a free, private app on Facebook where people can fill out a profile- again, it's confidential - about their eating, and then receive an appropriate prompt at a particular time of day that's vulnerable for them. For instance, you might say, "Afternoons are really rough for me." The prompt you will receive every day at the time you choose will have to do with helping you avoid unwanted eating in the afternoon.

It really targets vulnerable times. There's also a journal component so that you can answer questions and journal about your problem areas. Then you can go back and look at what you wrote before. It's a great way to keep track, and journaling is really wonderful for changing behavior because it raises awareness. So that's what the app is all about.

Lee: Fantastic. That's terrific that you're making that available to all of us for free. Thank you for doing that.

Karen, I really appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much for being a part of Stay Happily Married.

Karen: Thank you very much for having me. I enjoyed it.

Lee: To find out more about Karen Koenig you can visit her various websites at www.EatingNormal.com and at www.NiceGirlsFinishFat.com.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. In the meantime we love your feedback. If you have a comment about this episode or any episode, call us on our listener comment line at 919-256-3083 or e-mail us at comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com. We'd love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at [Comments@ StayHappilyMarried.com](mailto:Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com), or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.