

Lee: "Lessons Learned from TV Lovers." This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 210.

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.

Who could have imagined that it would possible to improve your marriage just by watching TV? With the continuous advances in technology, one of the greatest American pastimes continues to be checking out what's on television. We love TV. Whether you're trying to relax or looking for information on a topic, there's always a show for us.

What about a show for marriage? Maybe the sitcoms of the last 50 years can prove to be a very useful tool in teaching the world what marriage is really about. Does your marriage have what it takes to stand up against the famous sitcom sweeties like Mike and Carol Brady from "The Brady Bunch?" We're going to find out.

Dr. Kristen Wynns is with us today. She's a child and adolescent psychologist who owns Wynns Family Psychology, an adolescent specialty practice in Cary, NC. Dr. Wynns and her staff provide therapy and testing services for children, teens and parents. She's also the founder of a parenting website called NoWimpyParenting.com with services on the site available to help parents struggling with behavior and discipline problems with their children at home.

Dr. Wynns keeps her skills in marriage psychology tuned at home with her husband of 13 years. I'm really excited to welcome Kristen back to the show. Kristen, we're so glad could join us again.

Kristen: Thank you.

Lee: I'm sure I'm not the only one who's heard this before, but when I see the topic about television, all I ever think is that everybody says too much TV is bad for you. Are you going to disagree with that and tell us we can actually get something out of watching TV?

Kristen: Exactly, even though, of course, in TV land everything has to be exaggerated and simplified to make a point. There are actually a lot of great nuggets of wisdom that we can learn from analyzing some of the relationships on TV. You can tell yourself you're doing something productive after all when you're sitting there watching your favorite shows.

Lee: That's good. Now I don't feel like I waste nearly as much time. I'm making an investment in my marriage. You're making me feel good already.

Kristen: Right.

Lee: Let's pick a TV couple. There's a couple, Gabby and Carlos, that are on the show "Desperate Housewives." What can you learn from a couple like that?

Kristen: For each of the TV couples we'll be talking about, we're going to focus in on the secret weapon that they epitomize. For viewers who watch that show, they know that for Gabby and Carlos their secret weapon is overcoming adversity with commitment. In the TV world they have overcome an affair, the husband's imprisonment, alcohol problems and even a murder thrown in there for good measure.

Despite all of these significant hurdles, they made a commitment that no matter what happens they are in it for the long haul. They are going to stick together no matter what. They have that secret weapon that they're going to get through those challenges together and stay committed through it all.

Lee: Okay, Kristen. I'm going to trust you because you're the expert. That couple certainly has gotten through a lot. I can't argue with you. But these are still characters. I guess we can learn and see that they stuck together through it all, but when something like this happens to real people in the real world, it's just life-shattering. It's hard for a lot of us to even imagine having the strength to make it through all that we have to make it through.

Kristen: That's true, but with all couples, whether it's some of those significant hurdles we just talked about with Gabby and Carlos or just lesser challenges that still hit most couples, financial issues or parenting issues, with whatever the challenges are, we all know that the in-love feeling fades after a while. Once that honeymoon period is over and the lovey-dovey feelings have faded, then we just have to deal with real life.

Real life is not always fun. It's not always pleasant and it's often stressful, but it is important for couples to make that commitment to each other and to the marriage and think of themselves as a team that faces each of those challenges as they come and does the best that they can to get through them, and keep on trucking until the next one hits.

Lee: Right. You've used the word 'commitment' a couple of times and that obviously comes up a lot in the context of a marriage. How do you define that? What exactly is commitment?

Kristen: I think of commitment as having three important components. One is simply the dedication to the relationship. Instead of just thinking about each other as individuals, they think about the two of them, the 'we' factor rather than the 'I'. They are dedicated to each other and not just to each other as individuals but they are dedicated to the marriage.

That's one important component. Similar is the awareness of the big picture. Not just looking at the immediate benefits of how easy it would be to leave the marriage or to leave their relationship, but really looking at the big picture. What is the impact of the relationship on your children, on your health, on your job, really looking at the big picture of what your marriage means and not just getting caught up in the day-to-day stressors and thinking about how easy it would be just to exit the relationship.

The third component is to know where you're going and to have a clear destination in mind. Just like with parenting, if we have problems with our kids we know it's not an option to leave so we just make it work. We figure out a solution. We do the best we can. Unfortunately in marriages, many couples don't have that same commitment to know that the final destination is, "Hey, we're all going to be together for life."

That's the other really critical component; to know where you're going, to have that destination set. The destination is, "We are going to be together forever," as tedious as that may sound, and to focus on that and know that commitment. Neither one of you having leaving as an option, that's going to keep that commitment factor really driving that relationship in a positive direction.

Lee: Excellent advice. I love the way you define it and work through your three pieces: the dedication, the big picture and the destination. That really does make it easier to grasp.

Let's switch gears now. Let's go from "Desperate Housewives" over to "Modern Family" which is a show that I watch from time to time. I've now invested a fair amount of time in watching that show and I'm feeling good. You've got the married couple on that show, Claire and Phil, and they're a happier couple. What is the story on that couple?

Kristen: I love them, too. Their secret weapon is humor and laughing together. This is clear when you watch the show. They have real life challenges with three kids, crazy in-laws, job stressors and neighborhood drama. No matter what they're going through or what stressor has come their way, they're always laughing. They are always kidding around with each other, making jokes, kidding around with the kids. That secret weapon of incorporating humor and laughing into the relationship is very important for relationships. They symbolize that very well.

Lee: I agree. It's a funny show. I think laughing is great and a lot of people probably get together in the first place because of their senses of humor. My wife tells me that I'm very funny. It doesn't really seem reasonable to me, though, that humor can fix a whole lot of problems. Is laughter really the best medicine?

Kristen: It's fascinating, all the research that has connected laughter and humor to positive benefits in a marriage. There are so many. There are health benefits. It is known that when we laugh it releases the endorphins in the brain, the 'feel good' chemicals that would be equivalent to falling in love or eating chocolate or taking an antidepressant. It's known that every time you laugh your brain is happy and it's releasing those chemicals, and that spills over into the marriage.

When you're having a lot of laughter it reduces the stress that each individual feels. It adds to the quality and the connection of the marriage. It helps you be more focused and productive. In a lot of circumstances, laughter can be the release couples need when they are feeling stuck in the relationship or they are encountering another obstacle. Laughter can be the exit that helps you have some momentary respite from problems and feel connected. You may not solve the problem that day but there is hope, and as long as you can laugh together and enjoy each other, you'll get through whatever is coming your way.

There are known benefits for the relationship and just for the individuals with the impact on your health that's documented. If you look at happy couples that have been married for a while, you will inevitably find that they laugh a lot.

Lee: Good. We laugh a lot, so I guess we're in pretty good shape. "Desperate Housewives" and "Modern Family" are pretty modern shows. They are newer TV shows. I spent a lot of time in my youth watching things like "The Brady Bunch." What do we learn from those shows that were filmed during a time when theoretically life was simpler?

Kristen: I loved "The Brady Bunch" when I was growing up, too. I loved the family and what Carol and Mike, the parents in that family, epitomized. Their secret weapon is face-to-face communication. Of course, back when that show was airing there were no cell phones or laptops. I don't even think there were video games back then.

What I remember from watching that show are a lot of scenes of the two parents, Carol and Mike, just talking to each other. I remember scenes of them in their bedroom lying in the bed talking to each other, sitting at the kitchen table with Alice hovering nearby talking to each other, Carol being

in Mike's office and talking to each other. They literally just had that old-fashioned face-to-face communication despite the fact that there were six kids running around and a dog and the housekeeper. Despite that, they made time to just put in the hours of face-to-face communication which is critical in a healthy relationship.

Lee: There's a lot to learn from "The Brady Bunch." I never thought of it that way but you really are changing my perspective on a lot of that. Communication, obviously, is important. You mentioned the cell phones and all of the technology. I think there are a lot of us today that are guilty of paying too much attention to the technology and not doing what Carol and Mike did and actually communicating face-to-face.

You're an expert on this. What's the best way to break the bad habits with all this technology and get to a place where you and your spouse are actually doing some face-to-face?

Kristen: This fact is tossed out a lot, but it's important to remember and reflect on. Experts say only 7% of our face-to-face communication is in our words. The other 93% is our gestures, facial expressions, body language and eye contact. If you think about it, for couples who are in the modern age and doing a lot of emailing and texting and that kind of communication, they lose that very critical 93% of communication that's needed.

The recommendation that Mike and Carol really did is just making time for each other. In this day and age, that means everybody closing up their laptops at a certain time of the night and saying, "Let's catch up." My husband and I are even guilty of this. When we're in the house at the same time, we'll email each other something because we're both doing our work. That's okay for quick questions, but every so often go to the other room where your spouse is and say, "Hey, can we talk for a minute?" Don't take the quick and easy route of shooting an email.

It's really just about making it a priority to say, "Hey, let's connect once a day face-to-face." Fifteen or twenty minutes is all it takes to get a lot accomplished because, again, you have that 93% working for you to make that communication so much more effective. It's also helpful for sensitive topics, of course, to have that face-to-face communication rather than using technology to communicate for you.

Lee: Let's shift gears to probably one of the most successful TV shows of all time, "The Cosby Show." In that show we had Cliff and Claire Huxtable who were together and had a long marriage. What's the lesson from that show? What should we be learning from that couple?

Kristen: All these shows, if you haven't already figured out, are shows that I regularly watch or used to watch. I love them and I think that they are great for making our point about how they made their marriages work.

For Cliff and Claire, or Dr. Huxtable, I guess we need to call him, their secret weapon was putting their marriage first and keeping the spark alive. Of course, this is back in the '80s that their show came on. They weren't over-the-top with explicit or graphic sexual innuendos, but it was clear even back then that there was chemistry that was undeniable between the two of them. There was a lot of flirting and innuendoes.

That made them a very fun couple because you could tell that despite having a houseful of kids and important jobs - she was an attorney, he was a doctor - that they really had eyes for each other. Number one, even above their kids, even above their careers, they loved each other. They had that spark. They were still attracted to each other despite how many years they had been married and they made an active effort to communicate that and to make it obvious that they still had that spark. That's another important lesson we can learn from analyzing their relationship.

Lee: It's tough to keep that spark going when you're as busy as people are today. How did the Huxtables make it work? To watch the show, they didn't work very hard to keep that spark alive. What were they doing?

Kristen: They are similar to the Bradys in that they literally carved out time for each other. They told the kids to run off and go play or they came home from work early or put aside their work at night and literally made that time for each other. Even the romantic time, they didn't spell this out but time for sex was implied. That's been literally shutting their bedroom door when they had to or sending the kids away to grandma or to a babysitter or to the older siblings.

They just made it a priority that they were going to stay focused on each. Not just on the day-to-day, "Let's talk about what the kids are doing," but that romantic part of their relationship that made them fall in love in the first place. They made the effort to not take each other for granted, to get creative about keeping the romance alive, to focus on that and make that a known priority. Even to their kids, in appropriate ways, they made it clear that, "We have to spend time with each other." Our marriage spills down into our parenting and that's our number one priority.

Lee: Right. That was a terrific program, and you're right, there were a lot of lessons to learn from that show. I clearly need to wrap this up with you and go and watch some TV. Before I do that, any final messages you want to give us?

Kristen: If we look at all four couples globally, there is a common denominator that runs through all four relationships that is important for us all to take in. That common denominator is all four of those couples appreciated their partner, warts and all. Whatever weaknesses they had or mistakes they made or challenges, they appreciated and valued their partner. I think that's clear in all four TV relationships.

That factor, it's hard to really pin down what goes into that on a day-to-day basis. Couples who are listening can let it be known that they appreciate their partner, weaknesses and all, and that they value the relationship. That's the number one most important thing to them and they are going to show that by carving out time, flirting, keeping the spark alive. I think that goes a long way in helping couples reach the 25, 30 or 50-year mark of marriage.

Lee: Fantastic advice. Kristen, thanks you so much for joining us on the show today. I really appreciate you being here.

Kristen: You're welcome. It's been fun.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns and her practice, Wynns Family Psychology, visit her website. I'll put a link to it in the show notes. It's Wynns spelled W-Y-N-N-S, Family Psychology.com You can also reach her office at 919-467-7777.

Thank you so much for joining us again this week. We really appreciate you listening in. We'd also appreciate any feedback you have. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083 or you can email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

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

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