

Anna: Holidays from Hell. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode 225.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is it possible to get through a holiday season without losing your mind and stability in your marriage? Around the holidays, think Thanksgiving and Christmas, or Hanukkah. Couples and families tend to feel additional stress because of all the added pressures and expectations that surround the season. Like, extra work hours, long shopping lists, children out of school, and not to mention extended family coming to town to visit. During those times, it's very easy for schedules to become hectic and for everyday situations to get chaotic. A time that should be happy and joyful often becomes confusing and can leave couples feeling overwhelmed and helpless. It doesn't have to be like that though.

Our guest today is a marriage and family therapist who is all too familiar with the holiday blues. Dr. Michael Howard helps couples and families get on the path to enjoying each other and time together during the most stressful of times, like the holidays. As a professional counselor at Healing Solutions Counseling Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, he strives to help couples develop plans and coping strategies for all of life's pesky little messes. Welcome to the show, Michael. I'm so glad you could join us.

Michael: Thanks, Anna, it's a pleasure to be here.

Anna: All right, so when I think of stress around the holidays I primarily think of Thanksgiving, and Christmas or Hanukkah. Is this generally the case? People kind of get the wintertime blues?

Michael: Absolutely. For the most part, the holiday season pretty much starts right after Halloween and extends through the New Year really. So it's that entire period of time from late October, early November, all the way into January. And as you said in your intro, it can be an extremely stressful and difficult time for many couples and families.

Anna: Now this may be separate than some of the other things, but I'm kind of wondering, do you think that that issue of stress around that time has to do anything with kind of like the season or the weather, maybe? Do you think that has some effect on people feeling just crappier overall? Maybe because it's cold and nasty sometimes.

Michael: Sure, definitely. Yeah, during this time of year when it starts to cool off and people aren't outside as much. They're not perhaps doing the activities that they generally enjoy during the spring, summer, or even fall. It can start to weigh on them, and a lot of people don't really pick up on why they're feeling more sad or why they're even feeling depressed. But the whole idea you're alluding to is that concept of seasonal affective disorder where it's the winter blues . . .

Anna: Right.

Michael: . . . it's the cloudy days. Sometimes, it's the rain, the snow. Just the challenges that come with getting out and doing the things that we so typically enjoy during the other seasons of the year.

Anna: Right, right. I can totally relate to that. I actually used to live in Pittsburgh and I know a little bit about it being cold and dreary, and I know that can certainly cause some not so happy feelings.

Michael: Yeah, right, exactly.

Anna: Yeah, so what do you see as being kind of the main issue for these couples? What aspect of the holiday season usually causes them the most stress?

Michael: Well, there are several. Probably, the biggest thing is expectations. People have this idea that we have to make the holidays perfect . . .

Anna: Right.

Michael: . . . everything has to go exactly as planned. It's kind of this perfect Christmas, perfect Hanukkah, perfect Thanksgiving, whatever, from as we might see in a movie.

Anna: Right, right.

Michael: And that just isn't realistic. Our expectations in real life oftentimes don't match. We don't have the money for that perfect gift, perhaps. We don't have the situation where we can have every single relative that we want to have in town for that holiday. People sometimes just don't get along.

Anna: Yeah.

Michael: So that's the relational aspects of relatives just interacting with each other. So there are so many different things. But it's this idea of expectations. I think we delude ourselves into thinking that this year is going to be better, this year is going to be perfect, this year's holidays are just going to somehow become this magical experience that's going to bring everybody together, and life is going to be kind of this fantasy type experience and that just generally doesn't happen.

Anna: So the issues can kind of be separated, but then it seems like ultimately they come back to being about having these crazy expectations. Like, they want to be able to spend this amount of money but in reality, they maybe can't. Or they want the family to be perfect, and when the extended family comes into town, they want everything to be great and perfect, and happy and loving. And sometimes that doesn't work out. So ultimately it seems like it is kind of the expectation thing and which, like you were saying, it's not always reality to have this perfect holiday season with absolutely no problems or mishaps. So that's interesting.

Michael: Exactly. Let me kind of give you an example.

Anna: OK.

Michael: Perhaps, my son wants this gaming system and I just can't afford that gaming system. Or maybe, my daughter wants this particular doll or this particular toy that for whatever reason I just can't afford, I don't have the money for it. So because I can't provide that for them, then I start to think I've failed. I've failed as a father, perhaps even as a husband, and then I start to carry that weight on my shoulders of I can't provide for my kids what I unrealistically again, believe is my responsibility. What I

don't realize is that for the kids it might seem like it on the surface but it's not about that gift. It's about so many other things.

Anna: Yeah, for sure. Do you think that couples and families would maybe, actually, could reduce their stress levels if they just tried to lower their expectations? I know that sounds kind of bad, but if they were just more in touch with what the reality was and if they expected or if they kind of planned for something to go wrong. Or they just kind of said, "Oh, well, I know my child wants this gift but I know that I can't afford it." So if they went in to the holiday season knowing that, do you think they could reduce their stress by kind of, like, adjusting their expectations?

Michael: Oh, absolutely. I think it's about being realistic. It's also kind of telling yourself that everything is not going to go as planned. We may burn the turkey, or it may turn out dry, or for whatever may happen . . .

Anna: Right.

Michael: . . . you know the mashed potatoes may turn out lumpy and that's not the end of the world.

Anna: Lumpy potatoes.

Michael: That's right. We can still have fun, we can still enjoy each other. It's almost like we have to be able to slow down and laugh at ourselves a little bit just to say, "You know, whatever happens, happens. And we're just going to make the best of it." Really, it comes down to being thankful for what is working as opposed to shifting our thought process to things that aren't working.

Anna: Right. Just kind of got to look at it like it is what it is.

Michael: That's right, exactly.

Anna: Acceptance.

Michael: Yes, that's a very, very good word for it.

Anna: Right, yeah.

Michael: Just accept it, yep.

Anna: So when these issues come up and they're causing stress and worry for couples and in their relationship, what starts to happen? What do you see happening to their marriage? How is it affected?

Michael: As the stress starts to impact the individual, they start to project that onto their partner. And it can be in the form of anger; they can become more, just resentful. They may become grumpier, just more difficult to get along with. So that can escalate into arguments. That can escalate into disagreements, and just general tension. But it can also result in one partner pulling away from the other as well. Maybe even withdrawing into a different room or even leaving completely. So it's this negative cycle that the couple will get into where as one person feels this added stress and they start to respond to their partner in a way that's more tense, and more angry. It makes the other person feel like, wow, this person doesn't care, this person really isn't into this holiday, this relationship. They may then

respond with anger as well or they may just kind of back off and withdraw from the situation completely.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so, not a good situation to be in. It could be a negative cycle that a couple might get in which is not necessarily good.

Michael: Absolutely.

Anna: What is the best way for couples to get around this problem?

Michael: First of all, as we talked about its accepting that the expectations. It's accepting that everything is not going to go perfectly, it's not going to go necessarily as planned. Just because I can't afford a particular gift or just because something doesn't happen the way I really wanted it to, doesn't mean that this is a failure or more importantly that I am a failure. And then the other thing is to focus on the simple things. Focus and create rituals, memories. If you talk to pretty much anybody in a family situation, you ask them what do they remember about the holidays? It's kind of the little things; I remember sitting around the dinner table and maybe hearing grandma, grandpa tell stories. Or maybe it's a particular game we played. Maybe, it's a ritual of Christmas morning. Maybe, it's waking up early to see what was under the tree. Those types of things actually are the memories that last a lifetime.

Anna: Oh, yeah.

Michael: It's not how perfect the turkey was and for the most part it's not even about what gifts are there. It's about the feelings that are connected to those things.

Anna: Right. I actually remember this one time. This is just a little side note. When my brother and I were younger, there were these two gifts under the tree for us and it was our Christmas Eve. We were allowed to open one present. And so we had these presents that were identical for each of us under the tree, and we both were so convinced that they were Game Boys and our mom got us these Game Boys. And so we were like, "No, this is exactly what we want to open. We want to open these gifts." And she's like, "Are you sure?" And we said, "Yes". Sure enough, they were not Game Boys. They were actually electric toothbrushes. Right, yeah, needless to say, it was not funny then and we were pretty upset about it. But, look, I'm still talking about it, I still think about it, it's something that was actually a really great memory. And it was upsetting then but ultimately it turned out to be a pretty funny story so..

Michael: That is so great. Yeah. That is so true. Those types are memories are what again, just last a lifetime. And we continue to laugh about them and it's great.

Anna: They are so funny. Some of the crazy stories from the holidays. You have to look back and laugh.

Michael: You do.

Anna: And sometimes, I think that the best form of reducing your stress might be just laughing in that situation. When it's happening, just kind of roll with the punches, just go with it.

Michael: It is. The other part that you kind of alluded to is this idea of the financial stress. And that creates a really difficult situation for a lot of couples and families. We just don't do a really good job of realistically budgeting for what we're going to spend around the holidays. And that's why I do think that

having a good budget is important. I remember when I was a kid, my parents always had the Christmas Club savings fund or savings account now which I think helped them quite a bit because they were always putting money in it throughout the year which helped manage that a little bit and layaways and those types of things.

Anna: Yeah.

Michael: We don't have to go into a lot of debt to have a good Christmas.

Anna: Right, right.

Michael: It doesn't make sense to spend thousands of dollars put it on credit card and somehow spend the rest of the year or the next many years perhaps, paying that off.

Anna: Right, exactly. Start saving a little bit here and there. If a couple and a family can afford to do that, I guess that probably would be a good idea to kind of start early and maybe set some money aside so they don't have to worry about it all right at the end, last minute. Where is all this money going to come from? How am I going to afford this?

Michael: Exactly. Yeah, it's about planning ahead. And OK. If I can't afford a hundred dollar gift, let's say, what can I afford?

Anna: Right.

Michael: And let's find something in that price range. I would not want to spend the holidays worrying about paying this off for the next many years.

Anna: Right.

Michael: Or however long that takes. And that just seems like that would detract so much from the whole experience.

Anna: Mm-hmm. And it seems like that would ultimately add even more stress.

Michael: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And there are so many other stressors, too, in terms of seeing relatives that you don't see a lot. The conflict sometimes it's, "I don't get along with this person as well as this person." And where is everybody going to stay, that's another big one.

Anna: True.

Michael: Are people expecting to stay in hotels and the cost associated obviously could be a problem. It's. "Do we have a room for everybody and how are we going to manage the whole logistical aspect of it?"

Anna: Yeah, it's interesting that you brought that up because I was going to ask you about bringing extended family into the mix. What kind of things do you see happen and what are the main problems

when it's not just about your nuclear family but when we're talking about grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, cousins? When they are all involved, what problems are you seeing happen?

Michael: Well, with couples the primary issues are whose set of parents are we going to spend the holidays with.

Anna: Right.

Michael: Are we going to the husband's family, the wife's family? Assuming that they're in different places or even if they're not in different places. The in-laws often have this expectation that they are going to get the family for the holidays. So we have both sets of in-laws kind of fighting over the family, particularly the grand kids and so forth. And it just becomes this huge conflict usually around when are we going to go to this person's house, when are we going to go to that person's house. And especially what makes that even more stressful is if the weather is difficult. So not only are you possibly dealing with expensive plane tickets or a long car trip, but you're also dealing with snow, ice, road hazards, and just weather problems that exist during that time of year. And then on top of that, you also have a situation where you spend so much time figuring out who are we going to go visit and making sure that we visit everybody that we feel for some reason that we should visit or have to visit. That we're going at such a fast pace that we don't really get to relax. We don't really get to kind of mellow out and just enjoy it.

Anna: Enjoy it. Right.

Michael: Yeah, it's kind of like the idea of slowing down to smell the roses.

Anna: Yeah.

Michael: We just don't get to do that. People are in such a hurry to visit somebody, and I really think couples and families should at least once in a while spend their holidays at home and not worry about traveling to see somebody. It really creates a different dynamic. It's also important for families to create their own rituals that are separate from perhaps their extended family and all the aunts, uncles, cousins, and all those things. So it's balancing those.

Anna: Yeah, all those obligations that they feel that they have around that time of year. "Oh, I got to see this person, I got to do this, I got to go here, I got to go there."

Michael: And that's the key, it really is. Feeling like there's this obligation I have now to see this person.

Anna: Yeah, right. Because it's this time of year. This is the only time of year we can do it.

Michael: Yeah and where did that come from?

Anna: Right, there are not 364 other days in this year that we can go see you.

Michael: That's right.

Anna: So when you're talking about the in-laws and kind of deciding which family to go to, do you think that maybe a good solution for fixing that kind of situation is maybe saying, "OK. We will go to your

family for Thanksgiving. And then we'll go see my family for Christmas or Hanukkah," whichever you celebrate or switch off, transition the different years. Go here this year, next year we go to my family, stuff like that. Do you think that is the most realistic solution to that kind of problem?

Michael: It is. I mean that type of thing definitely helps. The problem is you're going to still have the conflict of, "My mom and dad really want us to be there for Christmas, even though we were there for Christmas last year. Although they may say they're OK with not seeing us on Thanksgiving, they really do." And then there are resentments that come up. And some of these may not be stated, they're felt. But they're not really sure how to do deal with it so they just kind of let this internal conflict or internal resentment build up. And it does impact the way they relate to one another.

Anna: Mm-hmm, for sure, yeah.

Michael: It's almost like you're choosing them over us.

Anna: Right, right. And that can cause a little bit of tension, I can imagine.

Michael: It does, it really does. And some couples, some families are just a little bit better at adapting to it than others. But I think it creates some in almost every family.

Anna: Mm-hmm, right, for sure. Now there is a little thing that I would like to talk about. There is that whole other issue about sometimes people tend to feel emotional around the holidays. And maybe, they have feelings of grief or loss, and sadness. So what do you say to that kind of situation? What do you think is the best way for individuals in relationships and in their families to move past the sadness and start to feel the joy again?

Michael: That's a really good question. I'm extremely glad you brought that up. The holidays are difficult. Again, I think it has to do with expectations. We expect life to somehow blossom during this time of the year. And it can be connected to grief and loss in the sense that maybe I've lost my parents and they're no longer around. So when the holidays come, it makes me remember them and remember the experiences of being with them. And now I feel sadness and I feel loss because they're not here now. And if I allow it to, that can kind of grab a hold of me and kind of pull me down, and it's this idea I don't have the opportunity to have the same memories or the same experiences that I had from before. But it's also sometimes tied to when we lose a friend or relative around the holidays.

Anna: Right.

Michael: Particularly if you lose a child or spouse close to Christmas, close to Thanksgiving. That can be extremely difficult, partly because our brain attaches now this difficult experience to something that's normally viewed as it should be really happy and wonderful. So we have this mixed idea or almost like an internal conflict between what should be good and yet what is traumatic or sad as well. And it's hard to separate those. "I want to be happy around the holidays but I can't help but remember I lost my son during that time." Or my daughter, my mom or my dad, whoever. That's really difficult.

Anna: Yeah and it seems like with that type of extreme loss, I believe that you never really get over that. That's never really something that you can get over, but you just have to learn how to move beyond it and still appreciate what you had in the moments when you did, when that person was around. But also,

then be able to still remember them but continue on with your life and be able to enjoy your life again in the future.

Michael: Right and it's about finding that. You hear the word closure a lot. It's not about forgetting . . .

Anna: Right.

Michael: . . .because we're not going to forget what happened. We're not going to forget that we've lost that person. But we can deal with the traumatic aspects of that and we can learn to cope, adapt, and to adjust to that in a way that really brings honor to that person that isn't there anymore. And there are things that we can do to create memories, whether it's things like, building some kind of memorial to them or a love garden, those types of things. And that can help a lot. Or if it's really traumatic it can be getting counseling or therapy specifically related to the trauma and the loss that's associated with that trauma so that it does become easier and we can still function, we can still have happy holidays without it being tied to the trauma, sadness, grief, loss, and so forth.

Anna: Right, absolutely. So I think after all this, ultimately, all of us really want to be able to enjoy the holidays and enjoy the time with our families. What's your best advice on gaining that appreciation and happiness in these stressful times?

Michael: I guess, in some ways it's kind of the glass half full concept.

Anna: Definitely.

Michael: Focus in on all the things we have. The blessings that we've been given and the fact that we do have a lot of opportunities and wonderful things. Whether it's just time with family that we might not always get to spend. Maybe it's seeing a smile on a child's face when they do get a certain gift. But it's really about the rituals, it's about those memories, it's about connecting to family, connecting to our children, to each other as a couple. And again, I think it starts with the expectations and learning to accept that what it is, whatever that happens to be, I'm just going to do the best I can and the best is good enough.

Anna: That's right.

Michael: I don't have to expect it to be something crazy magical that isn't realistic. And even if I fall a little short, it's still going to be OK. And it can still be a wonderful holiday. I don't have to please everybody; I think that's another important piece. Also, sharing in the work. I can remember growing up especially, the burden that my mom seemed to take on around the holidays in just trying to do everything; make sure the house is clean, make sure everything was done and decorated, the cooking, and all the different things that have to happen. And I guess it's also trying to share in some of that so that the burden's not on any one person.

Anna: All right, for sure, for sure. Well, Michael, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. I really appreciate you speaking with me.

Michael: Oh, it's my pleasure. I've enjoyed it.

Anna: Great. To find out more about Michael and his practice, Healing Solutions Counseling Center, you can visit their website at www.charlottetherapy.com or call 704-944-5530 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Anna Riley, until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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