

Lee: Hellacious Holidays: How to Deal with Your In-laws. This is Stay Happily Married Episode 226.

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. If the financial stress surrounding the holidays isn't enough, there can always be a little more to count on with the arrival of the extended family and the in-laws, or the anticipation of making the yearly trek to the airport. Of course, not everyone experiences tension with family members, but for those who do, when the issues come to a head during the holiday season there is added stress with unwanted consequences. For some people, the holidays can be a time when they become more acutely aware of the problems in their family, either because they are spending more time together, or because previous holidays have been difficult and it opens up old wounds. Whatever the situation or cause of the tension might be, our guest today, Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones, is here to offer advice to couples and families on how to deal with the stress of the holidays. Katrina, welcome to the show.

Katrina: Thank you.

Lee: I'm really glad you could join us again, and I think more than ever at this time of year we need your help. Tell me, what are some of the most common complaints that you're hearing about people dealing with family issues during the holiday season?

Katrina: I realize that I'm a little biased since I am a therapist, but I think people complain about everything with their family. Whether it's tension related to spending time with their family members, or with their in-laws; feeling accepted by their own family or their in-laws; not getting along with certain people, always having an argument with their sister or feeling like they have a strained relationship with a certain cousin. Then there's always complaints about money. How much money to spend, people spend money on different things, why do we have to buy these people presents when we only see them once a year? That type of thing.

Lee: Right. Oh my gosh, it's like you've been a fly on the wall in my life. Fantastic. Not that I have any issues with my in-laws. I mean, hey, I'm finally becoming part of the family. We've been married for 22 years, but hopefully they don't listen to this. What is the best way, when you're dealing with problems with in-laws, what's the best way to approach the situation? Let's say you don't get along with your mother-in-law or your sister-in-law. How do you deal with this?

Katrina: Well, I think that you really have to start with having an open conversation with your spouse. It's really difficult to have a useful conversation with your in-laws if you don't first have a conversation with your spouse. Ideally, which isn't the way this always goes, of course, but that your spouse would be able to take your concerns to his family or her family. Then you have a follow up conversation with them. Rather than that it's your responsibility to address this issue first, your spouse should do that. Really thinking about how do you make the conversations separate? Not having more than one complaint per conversation. Being as specific and fact based as possible and keeping focused on how things affect you, versus getting into the mode of blaming the other person. For example: My dad's side of the family is Ukrainian and my mom is not. Being able to say something like, "I feel left out when everybody else is speaking Ukrainian and I can't understand it."

Lee: Right, Right. OK. That makes sense. I think this is sort of the most difficult situation, but what about if your spouse doesn't really back you up? They don't really support you? You feel like they're taking the other side of things. What do you do in that scenario?

Katrina: I think the first thing is to keep in mind that sometimes they don't really know when you need to be backed up. Whether it's that, "Oh, this is the time you need help?" or they don't really know how to help. Really being specific about what it is that you need from your partner. Remembering what's happened in years in the past and talking about that as an example of, "This is what happened, this is what I would like you to do to help me." It's really scary to talk to your own parents or your own sister or whatever, about not liking the way that they're treating your spouse. Also thinking about how do you set boundaries and clear expectations? Really having a good understanding that in order for a marriage to work well, that there needs to be a priority on your marriage being important. That doesn't mean that your family of origin isn't important, but when there's an area of conflict that you really do have to side of your partner. If you're making the request of your partner to take your side, that it's helpful to be really empathetic to how hard that is for them.

Lee: Right, right.

Katrina: That's one of those areas where sometimes you need a therapist to kind of help you negotiate the terms of when do I stick up for you and when is it that you've got to figure out how to deal with my family?

Lee: Right, or a whole team of therapists, yeah. Who preferably can come with you for the holiday visit, yeah.

Katrina: An in-home therapy.

Lee: Exactly. A little motor home all heading for the relative's house, yeah. I mean, seriously. What do you see happening with the dynamic of the relationship if there's a definite tension between the partner and his or her in-laws?

Katrina: A power struggle can really develop where your partner feels like they have to defend either their family, or they feel like they have to defend you to their family, and then all kinds of guilt. Whether it's that - I'm just going to use the example of a mother-in-law because that's kind of what we think of a lot of the time - that the mother-in-law makes the son feel guilty for, "Oh, you want to, you don't love me anymore. You want to spend time with your wife." Well, half of that's true, I want to spend time with my wife, that doesn't mean I don't love you anymore. It's really kind of this power struggle that's occurring between the family members gets translated into a power struggle between the spouses. Anger towards your in-law or your own family member is taken out on your spouse.

If one of you is avoiding either your family or the other family and your partner doesn't know why, or maybe the in-laws or the family member doesn't know why, then maybe they take it out on the kids or again, you take it out on each other. There's also just an area of difficulty that can arise between differences in families. If one person comes from a calm, quiet family and the other one is a more loud, rambunctious family, the person from the different family doesn't necessarily see that as a problem, like, "How is that a conflict, we're just different?" They're not even aware of how difficult it is for their partner to deal with that difference. Interacting with your partner and your families, your partner's

family, so your in-laws, in a way that you can kind of look at, "This is a difference," versus "This is a problem."

Lee: Right. Right. What's the fallout, so maybe you're going to be miserable at the holidays, you're with the in-laws or whatever, and you're not happy, but that's a day or a few days of your year. What's the fallout back at home in the marriage when you just can't seem to get along with your spouse's family?

Katrina: I think that the fallout is that if you don't really deal with it things just get worse. Whether it's that you are continuing to take things out on each other, or you are taking it out on the kids, you're avoiding spending time with the family, things don't really get corrected if you're not dealing with it in the moment that it's happening.

Lee: Yeah, I get it. Obviously, there are issues, there's going to be fallout between the husband and the wife. What about the rest of the household? Do you see it spilling over into the kid's lives?

Katrina: Sure. The children can either feel like they're caught in the middle. If you're going to visit family, they feel the tension that's happening there, but then when you come home there's this sense of, "Well, I love all of these people. Why can't they get along?" I think particularly again, using the example of the mother-in-law, that, "Why can't you just be nice to grandma?" Saying that to your mom. That's kind of rubbing off on the kids in the sense of, "I don't even want to go spend time with our family because we know that things are going to be difficult or stressful."

Lee: Right. Right. I suppose you're not supposed to say to the kids, "Because Grandma is the devil."

Katrina: No, that's not usually helpful.

Lee: You experts are no fun at all, I'm just saying. OK. So let's switch gears just a little bit now. Some families, obviously there's this whole issue of getting along with people, but then in some families you also have issues where couples have different ideas about how they want to spend the holidays. They have different family traditions that they've grown up around. What do you do about that?

Katrina: Well, I think that you have to, again, try to establish your own family traditions as separate from your family of origin. Then really look at what are some ways in which that can overlap? So, you know, "We want to do this at our house in this way, but we still want to be able to spend time with my family, your family, how do we make that work?" Having the focus be on, "What is it that we want for our husband, wife, and our kids, what is it that we really need to establish as separate from both of our sets of families?"

Lee: Right. Right. Yeah. You've got to come up with your own thing. Is there a good system that you've seen work with the folks you've worked with to help come up with an agreement on what your family's new tradition or holiday plan is going to look like and is something you want to stick with for the long-term?

Katrina: I think that it can probably look different at different times in your marriage, particularly if you have kids. The different ages of your kids. Thinking about are there ways that you can incorporate elements of what each partner wants or elements of what their family tradition is? Some people will switch back and forth; either will spend time at one house at Thanksgiving and one house at Christmas, or will have some trade-off during the day depending on how close you live together. Can we all get

together? Can we have breakfast at one house and lunch or dinner at the other house and still have our own time? Really kind of thinking about that marriage is a compromise. You could certainly stick to, "This is the only way we're going to do it," but that's probably not going to work out for everybody to be happy. That's unlikely. If you feel forced engaging in some sort of tradition without getting your own traditions, without making both sides feel important, then you're going to feel resentful, which is going to lead to all sorts of problems.

Lee: Right. Yeah, all sorts of problems. I hear you. We've been talking a lot about the stress that comes from the holiday season, which is unfortunate because I think ultimately everybody's goal is to have a good time, to relax, to enjoy the time with family and with friends. What kind of resources are there out there for couples that they can turn to if there are major issues during the holidays?

Katrina: I think the best time to try to deal with these kinds of issues is before the holiday season starts. Being reflective of what's happened in years past that hasn't worked and then figuring out what you really want to do and talking about it now, rather than waiting until the last minute. Don't plan for Thanksgiving the weekend before Thanksgiving. Don't plan for Christmas the weekend before Christmas. Looking at, "What is it that we need to do differently before moving forward?" There are some self-help books about how do you blend and meld families together and make the holidays less stressful overall in the sense of spending and traveling and things of that nature. Sometimes, it's really helpful to go see somebody for individual therapy. It might just be to help you negotiate, "How do we handle this particular issue?" It doesn't have to be that we have problems in our marriage per se, but that we really just have a hard time agreeing about this particular topic.

Lee: Right. You haven't mentioned my favorite advice for this situation which is what I'm doing this year. We're going on a cruise.

Katrina: There you go.

Lee: You all let us know how Christmas turned out, we'll be on the boat. Listen, I think you've given us some very practical, good ideas. It is tough. Things do come to a head over this little period of the year and a lot of issues come out. Any other pointers, advice, anything else we should know before we let you get back to helping people work these issues through?

Katrina: There are two things that I think are helpful to keep in mind. The first one is to really remember that the person that you love and decided to marry comes from this family. Whatever it is that they do that drives you crazy, they also raised your spouse and did something right because you picked this person. Kind of keeping that in mind that they're not all bad. Then really thinking about how do you pick your battles? Which is what you would say with your kids, but thinking about the same thing of, "Is this something that really is going to change or is it not going to change?" What areas do you need to accept and what areas do you feel like, "I have to find a way to deal with this. I have to have a conversation about this," versus "In the end, it's not really going to make a difference and I need to find a way to let it go."

Lee: Right. Right. Good advice. Katrina, thank you so much for being with us today and talking us through these tough holiday issues. I really appreciate you sharing your advice.

Katrina: Oh, it's my pleasure.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones and her practice, which is KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services, visit their website at - this is a tricky one but I'm going to put a link to it in the show notes. It's drkatrinakjones.com, and I will definitely put a link to that one in the show notes so you can click right on it. That's KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services. The phone number is 919-493-1975. Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you will come back and join us again next week. For more information about this episode or future episodes, you can visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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