

Anna: Supporting a spouse with anxiety - this is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 255.

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. What's the best way to support a loved one with anxiety? Today I'm joined by Kate Thieda with KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services. Kate is a licensed professional counselor associate and a national certified counselor. Kate lives in Durham, and when she's not helping couples with issues in their marriages, she can usually be found with her partner, Annette, running, stand-up paddle boarding, or driving around town in her vintage Corvette.

Kate is the author of "Loving Someone with Anxiety" and is an expert on how anxiety can lead to crippling problems in a relationship. She's here today to help us understand how the loved ones of those suffering from anxiety can offer support. Welcome to the show, Kate. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Kate: Thank you, Anna.

Anna: So, let's start with, maybe, defining what we mean when we talk about anxiety. What are some of the behaviors that indicate that someone is dealing with it?

Kate: Sure. So, for example, I'm feeling a little anxious right now. I know I'm feeling anxious because I can feel my heart beating a little faster than normal. I'm aware that my chest feels a little tight, and my stomach feels a little jumpy. Anxiety is something everyone experiences, and it's actually a survival mechanism. Without anxiety we might not react appropriately in dangerous situations or have trouble motivating ourselves to do things that need to be done.

So our bodies have this automatic response system that makes us jump back when we step in the road in front of a moving car, and most of us wouldn't pay our bills if we didn't have some anxiety about what might happen if we didn't. So this is all normal, and this is how we manage to survive, by having anxiety.

But behaviors you might see in yourself or a loved one that might indicate anxiety is a problem, would be chronic physical symptoms, like the ones I just described, or behavioral signs, things like avoidance of places or activities or things, fleeing uncomfortable situations, performing compulsive behaviors, like washing your hands multiple times or repeatedly checking the door locks, or even using drugs or alcohol prior to an event that might make somebody anxious.

You might also notice that you or your loved one is using words like you're feeling worried, or you're dreading something, or you're feeling overwhelmed, you're feeling pressure, or saying that you're panicked.

Anna: Okay. Right. So then, would you say that there's a difference between, I don't know, everyday anxiety over specific issues and clinical anxiety?

Kate: Absolutely, there is. As I mentioned, everyday anxiety is necessary for our survival. We worry about our bills. We worry about whether our families are safe. Are we going to be able to retire someday? Will the presentation we have to give at work go well, and so on. But how you can begin to tell whether anxiety is crossing a line into a clinical anxiety disorder is whether the anxiety is interfering with your life.

So everyday anxiety tends to dissipate when the anxiety provoking situation is over, but if someone has an anxiety disorder, the anxiety is generally always present and interferes with the quality of life for the person who's experiencing it.

Anna: Okay. Right. So then, what would you say the relationship is like if we're talking about a relationship for a couple? What would it be like for the spouse that's dealing with the clinical anxiety?

Kate: Sure. So for the spouse who has an anxiety disorder, they're likely to be struggling with a couple of issues. Besides having anxiety, they may also be feeling guilt, or shame, or fear. It's also not uncommon for someone with an anxiety disorder to have another mental illness, such as depression or an eating disorder, or to be a substance user.

So for those people not only does that person have struggles with anxiety, but he or she may also feel that they're not pulling their weight in the relationship, or they might be ashamed by their anxiety and how it impacts their relationship and how they interact with the world, or they might be afraid that their partner will end the relationship because of their anxiety.

Anna: Right.

Kate: They may also be frustrated that they can't do what the non-afflicted partner can do, such as socializing easily at parties or riding the elevator to the top floor of the building or even just being able to walk out of the house without checking that the stove is off.

They may also feel that their partner can't possibly understand the anxiety they're experiencing or wish that their partner would do something to ease their anxiety, if not take it away altogether, and having these feelings can cause a lot of tension in the relationship.

Anna: So how do you think that they interpret normal behaviors from their partner?

Kate: Well, they may wonder, "Why can't I be like that?" Or they may think that they should be acting differently than they are and feel a lot of pressure.

Anna: So then, from the standpoint of the other spouse or the other partner who is not experiencing the anxiety, how do you think that they perceive the relationship, and how do they look at the relationship from the side of . . . or how do you think that they feel to have a spouse or a partner that's constantly anxious?

Kate: Right. So, in my book "Loving Someone with Anxiety," I talk about five common emotions that the non-afflicted partner might experience, recognizing that each relationship is

unique and each person's experience is subjective. So the emotions I discuss in the book that the non-afflicted partner might have are anger, frustration, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety.

So, to start, let's talk about anger. The person who does not have the anxiety disorder might feel that this anxiety just isn't fair and that it's absolutely ridiculous that their life has to revolve around the person who has anxiety. The non-afflicted partner may think, "Why should I have to change my vacation plans because he won't get on a plane," or something like "If only she would get over her anxiety, maybe she could get a job and help support this family, too."

Another common feeling is frustration, having to constantly adjust and adapt to your partner's anxiety can be very frustrating. You may have expectations for how things are going to go, either on a certain day or in life in general, and then find out at the last minute that your partner can't or won't participate because their anxiety is getting in the way. And having to make excuses for your partner's behavior can also get frustrating, as could having to participate in rituals your partner may do just so you can move on with your day.

So an example of that might be you go grocery shopping and you just want to put the groceries away and move on to the house cleaning, but if your partner says no, the groceries need to be put away in a certain order, and all the cans in the cabinet have to line up a certain way, and they have to be alphabetical because they can't let it go if it's not, that can get incredibly frustrating.

Anna: Right. Right.

Kate: So another emotion I discuss is loneliness. Loneliness can be a problem for the non-afflicted partner. One of the main reasons we get into relationships is because we want to be with the other person and share experiences, but when anxiety prevents that person from fully participating in life with us, we can feel really lonely.

Most people starting a relationship have hopes and dreams for what the future will be like, but when your partner refuses to go to parties with you, or to socialize with friends, or says they're afraid to do something like rock climbing or flying a plane, or they won't go out to eat with you because the utensils at the restaurant might be contaminated, the non-afflicted partner might find themselves isolated and having to do things by themselves. And that can lead to loneliness.

So sadness is another emotion they might feel because they've lost the relationship they were expecting to have. They might also feel sad because of the quality of life of the anxious partner. The non-afflicted partner can usually clearly see how the anxiety impacts their loved one's life and wish that things were different.

And the final one that I discuss is that the non-afflicted partner may actually develop some anxiety of their own around this. They may be anxious about whether the anxious partner is ever going to get better. They may be concerned about whether this anxiety is going to destroy their relationship, and then go down the road of what are the ramifications of a divorce going to be on my life and their life and our children's lives, and they may also begin to wonder if their partner is right to have the worries he or she does and start to lose perspective on what is realistic.

Anna: Right. So if the non-afflicted spouse or partner doesn't really understand how to deal with the anxiety or why it's there in the first place, do you see sometimes them doing the wrong thing, and kind of making it worse just because they simply don't really know what the best thing to do is?

Kate: Yes, that absolutely happens all the time. For those of us who treat people with anxiety, it's very common to learn that the partner has been unintentionally reinforcing the anxiety by doing helpful, so they think, things for the anxious person.

So an example of this might be the loved one making sure there are no spiders on the deck outside before they eat dinner outside, or for the non-afflicted partner to go grocery shopping because the anxious partner fears she's going to have a panic attack if she's in the store by herself, or for the partner to agree to drive to California instead of flying for the family reunion because the anxious person refuses to fly, even though that's going to take way longer to drive.

Anna: Right. Right.

Kate: So it's really important for the therapist to do psycho-education with loved ones to explain why the behaviors that they think are helpful are not only not helpful, but are actually helping the anxiety to become more entrenched, and is also teaching the anxious partner that there is, in fact, something to be anxious about.

Anna: Right. It's almost like they're enabling.

Kate: They are.

Anna: And the same kind of situation with substance abuse and that kind thing, just being the enabler, and you think that you're helping out and supporting, but you're really not.

Kate: That's correct.

Anna: Right. So then, what are some of the big problems that arise from a lack of inability to deal with the anxious partner?

Kate: So the biggest problem I've come across as a therapist is when the non-afflicted partners do not educate themselves about what their partner is going through. They don't get support from others, and then decide that they can't handle the issues that come up in their relationship because of the anxiety, and therefore decide divorce is the only answer.

By the time these couples reach my office, unfortunately, it's usually too late to change their minds and fix the situation. There's likely been a long history of either ignoring the issues that have arisen from the anxiety, but despite the fact that it looks like they're ignoring it, on the outside the non-afflicted partner has been silently stewing inside.

Anna: Right.

Kate: Or another issue is that the non-afflicted partner has been accommodating, as we just talked about, for so long that burn-out has just hit, and they've decided, "That's it. I can't do this anymore. My only solution is to leave." And usually in both of these situations, the anxious partner is blindsided by the announcement that their partner wants a divorce, and then they panic even more, because not only are they losing the relationship, they're also losing the person who has likely been protecting them or making the anxiety bearable.

And so now, what are they going to do? So if a couple comes to me, whether or not they're at the point of divorce, often it's the non-afflicted partner who is initiating the therapy, not always, but a lot of the time, and this is because the anxious partner is often quite content in the relationship because their partner has been taking care of everything for them. Or, they might be in denial of how much their anxiety is impacting their relationship.

This can make it really difficult to engage the anxious partner in therapy because they're blind to the problems and think that there's nothing to be fixed. We often see this, especially with people who have obsessive-compulsive disorder and hoarding issues. Many times the family members are the first ones to make the call for help in dealing with the issues because they can clearly see there's a problem, but this is also common with other anxiety disorders as well.

Anna: So then what is the solution to this? What are the steps that you suggest to take to start fixing the problem and making the relationship better?

Kate: So in my book, again, I discuss many ways that couples can work together to reduce anxiety and improve their relationship as they do that. There's an entire chapter on communication techniques, and in there I talk about how to have difficult conversations. And there are specific steps that teach partners listening and speaking techniques that will help them have effective conversations, and it's loaded with examples to show couples exactly how to do this and what it sounds like.

Another chapter in the book is devoted to lifestyle changes the couples can make to reduce anxiety. In that chapter I talk about things, like how diet and exercise can be used to reduce anxiety. I discuss reducing the use of technology, putting limits on when and how you use your computer and your cell phones, and other forms of technology. I discuss about exposure to media, including TV news and social media, and how that can affect anxiety levels.

I also discuss how couples can evaluate the obligations they have, not just at work, but socially and to their families as well, to see if there are areas that they can cut back, and I also talk about the importance of couple time, being together where there are few distractions and where you can focus on your relationship.

Another chapter in my book is all about mind-body techniques that can reduce anxiety for both partners and has many examples of things you can do together and practice as a couple. So for example, I have instructions about how to do a body scan and progressive muscle relaxation.

There's a part about practicing imagery and practicing alternative thoughts and affirmations, and also how to create a list of pleasurable distractions to use during periods of acute anxiety. And

then the final chapter of my book is specifically for the non-afflicted partners and emphasizes the importance of self-care. We often associate the term "care giver" with either parents of children or people who care for the elderly, but the reality is if you have a loved one with anxiety or any kind of mental illness, you are a care giver.

So this chapter specifically reminds the loved one that they need to care for themselves as well and has exercises and tips for how to make themselves a priority. Of course, it's always easy to make excuses about why self-care just can't happen. There's always something else that could be done, but I argue that self-care needs to happen if the relationship is not only going to survive but thrive as well.

Anna: Absolutely. Yeah. Okay, where can we find your book?

Kate: So thank you for asking. My book, "Loving Someone with Anxiety," is available on Amazon.com. It's available at your local Barnes and Noble, and it's also available through New Harbinger Publications, who is the publisher.

Anna: Very nice. Well, we should all check that out for sure, give it a read.

Kate: Yeah.

Anna: Well, Kate, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Kate: Thank you, Anna. It's been a pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Kate and her practice, KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services, you can visit their website at [www.kkjpsych.com](http://www.kkjpsych.com) or you can call 919-493-1975 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](http://stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Anna Riley, until next time, stay happily married.

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