

Anna: The Sound Relationship House. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 260.

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. Do you and your partner have what it takes to build a sound relationship house? The Sound Relationship House Theory was developed by relationship expert, Dr. John Gottman, and follows the notion that it's essential for couples to cultivate and build a fundamental process for the success of the relationship.

The theory includes areas such as trust, commitment, knowing your partner's world, sharing fondness and admiration towards one another, having a positive perspective about your marriage, managing conflict, making life dreams come true, and creating a shared meaning in your marriage.

When couples get stuck in repetitive argument patterns it can be difficult to reach agreement, but what most don't realize is that it might be more important for them to work on having more fun in their marriage, rather than just focusing on reducing conflict.

Our guest today is Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones, a licensed psychologist and the owner of KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services in Durham, North Carolina. Katrina is here to discuss Gottman's Sound Relationship House theory and to give couples some solid tips on how they can follow the theory throughout their marriages.

Welcome to the show, Katrina I'm so glad you could join me today.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

Anna: Why do you think couples sometimes get stuck in repetitive argument patterns in the first place?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Each person always has a position in an argument, and each person's position has a hidden agenda. And that's embedded with some deep personal meaning to the individual that they may or may not be really talking about making compromise seem completely unthinkable.

For example, fights about money are not really about money so much. It's about what money means to the person. Do they think money means something different to their partner? In addition, people tend to think about things either through an emotional lens or a rational lens. We make our best decisions when we can integrate our emotions with rational thoughts, which is really hard for people to do when they're in the heat of an argument unless they're very intentional and they practice doing that.

It's especially hard when partners have a different way of experiencing things. Either one tends to be more rational or one tends to be more emotional, and then those two collide and "boom," you just get in that same pattern of argument.

Anna: It's almost like it's a cycle.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Anna: If a couple is in therapy, for instance, what is the benefit of focusing on things other than just reducing the conflict?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: There's a growing awareness that good friendship and shared meaning really fosters our relationship with our partners. You can have a household that's functional where people aren't fighting, but if there's not a pleasant sense of harmony then it's not really a functional, healthy relationship. It's just functional from a practical standpoint.

Couples need be able to identify and communicate a sense of purpose to one another and the meaning of how they want their relationship to move through time together. What are their priorities and values? What are their goals and missions? What they think about the legacy of their family? What they want to pass down to the next generation?

Anna: Okay. Well, let's dive right into Gottman's Sound Relationship House theory that we were talking about in the intro. What is the foundation of it?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: The foundation of any really good relationship is trust and commitment, and that's built through having more positive than negative interactions. The somewhat bad news is that you have to have a lot more positive interactions than negative interactions. It's something like four positive interactions to every one negative interaction, which seems like a lot of work but good relationships seem to have matching in certain areas so you have a preferred way that you like to fight with one another.

Believe it or not, fighting isn't all bad. If both of you agree that you're going to be fighters, then that can work out. If both of you agree that you're going to avoid things, that can work out. If one's a fighter and one's an avoider, that's a problem. It's also being matched on what you think about emotions. If one person thinks it's healthy to express anger and one person thinks it's scary to express anger, that's a problem. Being able to talk through issues rather than getting stuck in them, and then when people make a mistake, being able to make a repair, have an apology, and have the other person respond to it.

The flip side of that is if somebody tries to make a repair attempt and is shut down, that leads to more negativity about the relationship. It leads to what Dr. Gottman calls "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," which is my favorite phrase ever. He talks about criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling, and that those things really impede people being able to talk about issues and have positive feelings about one another, which also leads to not accepting influence from your partner and being really emotionally overwhelmed and just not able to engage with your partner.

Anna: Right. So beyond the foundation, what are the beginning parts of his Sound Relationship House theory?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: The way that it's set up, if you were to look at a graphic of it, it looks like its levels, but the intent wasn't that you have to work your way through each level and that you have to work your way through all of the levels at once.

Some of the different areas are building love maps. Doing things to develop your friendship with your partner such as asking open ended questions about one another like what are their hobbies, who are their best friends, what are their best childhood experiences, the kind of thing that you do when you're dating one another that you tend to kind of get away from over time.

Then spending time together without your children, your family, your friends, your colleagues, just one-on-one time together.

Anna: Right. Right.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Sharing fondness and admiration. Showing daily appreciation for one another, words of love, recognition, affection. And this again is one of those things that is easy to get away from. We get into that sense of, "You should just be putting away the dishes." Well, yeah, you probably should just be putting away the dishes, but everybody likes a little pat on the head and a thank-you.

Those feelings of fondness for each another they go away if you're not doing it. It's one of those things where even if it feels like, do I have to do it, the answer is yes, you have to do it in order to have those positive feelings towards each other.

Turning towards one another. When there's stress we tend to either turn towards our partner or turn internally. Sometimes, we turn toward someone else. That doesn't necessarily have to mean a romantic partner but a friend or a family member. The idea is that you want to practice having what Gottman calls a "stress reducing conversation." It's that idea at the end of the day you check in with each other. You talk about what's going on. The person who is listening really listens without interruption, shows interest, expresses empathy, sides with their partner, and doesn't try to solve the problem, which is a big area of contention for couples.

One of his examples, which I think is my favorite, is doing the "Oh poor baby". You don't necessarily have to say that, you can find your own way to say, "That's so horrible that happened to you" rather than, "How do we fix it" or, "What did you do to contribute to that problem?" Having all of these kinds of things in place helps you have a more positive perspective about the relationship.

If you are doing things together, and you know each other well, and you think fondly of each other, and you're turning towards each other, then you're more likely to have an overall positive sense of the marriage than a negative sense which helps build that strong commitment and trust in one another.

Anna: Right. What part of Gottman's theory involves solving problems?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, he doesn't ignore the idea that we have to manage conflict, thank goodness.

Anna: It is there.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Talking about how you have to understand your partner's point of view and doing this without blaming the person and defending your own position, so that you're asking questions and exploring rather than really trying to make your position known. That involves recognizing, again, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," and developing the antidotes to those things like compromise, accepting influence, and not turning away from your partner.

And then thinking about what is a resolvable problem versus a perpetual problem. Every relationship has a perpetual problem of some sort. Some are bigger than others, but things tend to get gridlocked because of the meaning they have to people. You need to understand your own and your partner's meaning behind what you tend to argue about. Deal with your own emotional sense of flooding, being overwhelmed, getting stuck, making repairs to one another and accepting them and really accepting that this is one of those topics where, "We're probably going to have to agree to disagree" and find a way to not let it be an argument too often.

Anna: Right. I guess part of it would be accepting that there will be those perpetual problems that are ongoing, and it's just a matter of managing them versus the resolvable problems that are smaller and they don't come up as much.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Anna: Okay. So then what are the last parts of the theory that couples can use?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: What I think is the really fun part of this theory is focusing on how you can help each other make your life dreams and aspirations come true. Part of that goes back to knowing your partner. It also goes to knowing yourself. What does your partner, what do you need out of life? What needs to happen to make that come true, and having conversations about that.

If your life dream is that you want to make sure you get to travel to France before you die, what do we need to do to make sure that happen, acknowledging it might not happen this year and it might not happen for a long time, but what do we want to do to make sure that happens.

And then creating shared meaning in the relationship. How do you intentionally create rituals of shared emotional connection? It's the idea of every morning before you leave the house you have that ritual of having coffee together or the goodbye kiss. When you come home, how do you greet one another? What do you do with bedtime? How do you think about dates and getaways and what do you do at mealtimes?

It is partly habit, but it's also really intentional that you have the conversation of, "This is important, and this is why we are doing it. It's not just a quick peck on the cheek each day because we feel like we ought to do it, but because we really want to be connected to one another."

Anna: Right. What is the benefit for couples when they follow this theory, stuff that you've seen maybe with maybe couples you've worked with? What do they take away from it really?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: The good news is that it works.

Anna: Yeah.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Of course, it's kind of like any type of therapy. Not everything works for everybody all of the time, but there's a lot of research that really backs that these are important areas for couples to cultivate in their relationships. The goal is really to have a good enough marriage with more positive than negative interactions rather than a perfect marriage. That involves understanding the myths of what people think marriage should be.

Some people think it should be kind of quid pro quo, where you do for me and I do for you and everything will be fine, but that doesn't feel good in the long run. Having some acceptance of what is changeable versus what needs to be managed, so going back to that perpetual versus solvable problem. A lot of couples want to do mind reading, "You should know what I want and you should do it", but that doesn't generally work.

Anna: Right. Definitely not.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: It's also okay to have high expectations of your partner because some people will say if I don't expect that much then I won't be disappointed, but you'll probably continue to be disappointed if you don't expect a lot from your partner. So this particular theory helps you understand what those myths are but then build in how you deal with your initial thought of what a perfect marriage would be. How do you deal with that in a way that you can be happy with your marriage even if it's not perfect?

Anna: Well Katrina, is there anything else we should know, or do you have any additional suggestions for couples for adding to Gottman's theory?

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think that one of the things that can be really helpful that you can just look up online is called the Daily Temperature Reading. Somebody, I'm sure, at some point on this show has talked about it before. It's one of those tools that you can use on a daily basis to check in with one another to practice how you listen to each other and support one another. I think it's a really great tool that a lot of people like.

And then keeping in mind that all marriages go through ups and downs and that when they've talked to people who have been together for 50-whatever years, that everybody says they go through one year, if not multiple years, where they really do not like their partner. But they are committed to their marriage, and it's that commitment and that trust in one another that keeps it

together and that you come back around to all those other pieces that help you remain engaged in your marriage.

Anna: Right. Definitely. Well, Katrina, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Sure It's my pleasure.

Anna: To find out more about Katrina and her practice, KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services, you can visit their website at www.kkjpsych.com. I'll make sure I put a link to that in the show notes, 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. I'm Anna Riley. 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 would love to hear your feedback and comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.