

Stephanie: Long distance love. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 264.

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

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Does absence really make the heart grow fonder? The modern day world of employment is a far more competitive place than it was only a decade ago. The nine to five work day has seemingly disappeared and with it the typical business commute.

Today it's not uncommon to see married couples engrossed in the demanding nature of their jobs and saying, "Goodnight", or even perhaps, "Good morning", to each other from opposite ends of the globe. Planes, trains, and automobiles make the world a much smaller place, and this is a beneficial feature that many companies are taking advantage of. With the physical distance between spouses growing, how can a relationship survive the absence? Exactly how much distance is too much? And when does absence stop making the heart grow fonder and start tearing apart the relationship?

Earning her doctorate in clinical psychology from Regent University, Dr. Janet Savia has an extensive background in the health care profession. She's worked in medical laboratories, as a high school teacher, in a Fortune 50 corporation's health care division, and as a health care consultant. These days Dr. Janet Savia is a therapist working with individuals and couples at Sage Psychology Group in Durham, North Carolina.

Welcome to the show, Janet. I'm really glad you could join us today.

Janet: Great. I'm glad to join you too, Stephanie.

Stephanie: Now what is it that you're seeing exactly in regards to couples who have to travel for various obligations?

Janet: The reality is the job market holds a lot of uncertainty, and I am seeing a lot of couples who are hesitant to uproot their families. They're hesitant for one partner to sort of uproot their career. So they'll try to tough it out and have one partner live on one side of the country and the other remain until there's a sense that things are a bit more stable.

Stephanie: No. I can relate to this. My parents themselves because of the job issues... my father has lived in Kentucky, he's lived in New York, and it's one of those where she's always going back and forth. So when I hear long distance relationship, and I know other people hear this too, I, a lot of the times think about the negative things. "I'd give it a few months," or, "That will never work out," or, "How do you live like that?" Now what's your take on this stigma that goes along with these long distance relationships?

Janet: I don't know that it is as much stigma as it is an issue of just really being realistic that this kind of relationship is going to have very different challenges, and it's going to be more stressful in different sorts of ways. So I'm a person who comes from a perspective that information is

power. And so if we kind of know up front when we are faced with these kinds of challenges then we can be very practical and proactive in doing things that will better equip us to handle these special stresses.

Stephanie: And these stresses, what are these stresses that these couples are having to deal with when they're facing the distance?

Janet: There are a lot of challenges. Just to give you some broad categories, communication. Technology in theory has resolved a lot of that, and certainly it has, but communication is still a challenge. The idea of companionship. You miss having that person at home when you come home at the end of a long day. The cost. Just the logistics of maintaining multiple households can be a challenge.

If there are children in the relationship - oh my goodness - that increases the stress geometrically. And then the sense of community. Now instead of couples sharing the same community and being supported and interactive and connected, they now are split. So all of these are just some of the major categories where the stress can be felt.

Stephanie: Now are these issues tied to any specific common factor about these couples from what you can tell? Is it younger couples have issues? Is it older couples that have been together longer that have issues?

Janet: I'm old. I'm older than dirt. So I really can't say that it's old versus young or even the tech savvy versus those who go with a laptop. Where I think it is the most difficult is when there are children involved. When you have two consenting adults who have a lot of resources at hand and can be very self-determined, that's very, very different than when you are talking about a family with children still in the home.

So from that standpoint maybe younger versus older might make a difference. But I would say it really has more to do not so much with the age but just whether or not they are children in the home. And it can be children from high school age all the way down. The age of the child doesn't really matter so much, it's just that presence of another person who has needs and demands. Suddenly now we have got a single parent.

Stephanie: Okay. I know that we're fortunate enough now to live in an era where the boundaries of communication aren't as large as they used to be. We have smartphones and video calls that we can do. And there's global cell phone coverage so no matter where you are in the world, we can always get in touch with each other. Now what role are these technologies playing with this issue of absence with either partners or families that are involved, too?

Janet: I think these tools are wonderful. If you think back 100 years or more where letters were the extent of communication and it could take months and sometimes years for communication to travel from one person to another. The technical tools are wonderful, they're just not enough. They're not enough. Because what do you do when you are on the West Coast, let's say in San Francisco, and your partner is on the East Coast in Boston? It's not just about being able to see

each other, being able to talk with each other or text one another, it's about you're in a different part of your day.

So the technical tools are helpful, but they just aren't enough. So we're fooling ourselves if we think that Skype or FaceTime or those kinds of things can completely overcome the issue of distance. I'll give you a good example there. In the military, these are people who deal with long-term relationships all the time and they're utilizing Skype and all of these various technologies. But it's not enough. It's not going to really totally overcome the impact on a relationship.

Stephanie: Right. Yeah, I remember back they used to have times where they would do the satellite phone calls for military couples. And now anyone can get on Skype and call home, but it's an issue with the time zones. Especially like you said, when there's families involved that's not easy when they're not there to watch them go through these moments, those pivotal moments that parents should be there for.

So in a scenario where you do have the one spouse travelling and one that's staying local, where it's not both people out of the house all the time, what is it like for those people that have to remain local while they're spouse is off and around the world?

Janet: It's hard. Again when you look at the military, you see they have actually built in the structural support and this very close knit intentional community to support the spouse who is remaining while the other partner is traveling. It is so hard and oftentimes I'll go back because this is one of the difficult times, the logistical demands with children. You now move very quickly and very abruptly from being a two-parent household to a one parent household.

That sense of companionship is certainly undermined. Pillow talk, if you will, is not there. The table, the bed, the sofa becomes solitary experiences rather than shared experiences between a couple. So a lot of those casual opportunities for emotionally connecting with one another are lost. It's very expensive to have two households.

Again, military doesn't really fit in this particular situation, but the logistics of maintaining a household by yourself... if there are pets, let's say, there aren't kids but there are pets, getting to appointments, feeding, airing, the A/C breaks down, or the plumbing backs up or, "Oh my goodness, I need to take the car in to have the oil changed."

All of those tasks have a tendency to fall more heavily on the spouse who is left at home. And what this can do is really create a lot of tension, a lot of sense of, "I'm doing this all by myself and this is not fair and I don't like it," and it can really undermine that sense of companionship even more.

Stephanie: Right. Now you had mentioned earlier it's a particularly difficult issue especially when they have children, not that it's not difficult for those who don't. Like you said, there are so many things that can come up, and it really helps to have two people and four hands. But for the couples who do have children, what effect does the distance have on the children as well as a single parent, I guess, that's at home having to raise them by themselves now?

Janet: A couple of different things. Children, because they don't know anything different, are just as happy to see mommy or daddy's face on Skype and can adapt and adjust. Children are very, very resilient. Where things can get really confusing is one parent has been home for an extended period of time. They have had to be it relative to parenting.

They have had to manage the household. They have had to manage the parenting responsibilities. They have, in some cases, had to manage a job as well. They are having to do it all and then the traveling spouse comes home. The roles become very confused because this one person is accustomed to making all the decisions on their own without necessarily having to consult or rely on the other partner.

So now that partner is home, how do they adjust? How do they renegotiate that household contract? And that includes parenting. There's been one parent to do the disciplining, to set the boundaries and the limits, to do the monitoring. Now both parents are together. Where do they go? And for kids oftentimes what happens is there's a sense of confusion. And something we call in psychology we call splitting where the kids are accustomed to going to the at-home parent, but now the other one is back and the other one doesn't know the rules of the game.

And so if they go to the at-home parent and that parent says, "No, you know the rules." Then being kids and being part of their job description, they are going to go to that other parent who might not be as familiar with the rules and say, "Can I do this or have this," or what have you. So that kind of splitting can occur very, very easily when there are children and parents are scattered here and there. It doesn't have to happen, but that certainly is one of the risks involved relative to the kids.

Stephanie: I imagine this can apply to the feelings about the children too, but how often do you see things like jealousy or paranoia appear when there is that distance as a factor in the relationship?

Janet: Paranoia is a tricky term. To me that means something probably different than you. But I would say jealousy and selfishness, I see a lot because instead of this sense of, "We're teaming together," if the couple has not been wise, if they haven't been intentional. If they've just tried to push through and, "We'll just try to push through this and just tough it out," oftentimes one partner will feel that they're carrying more of a burden than the other. One partner will feel like, "I work hard. I'm away from home, I come home and now you want me to do all of the child care and all the errands and all of this."

So there is this sense of two individuals rather than a team. And when you have that kind of a setup it is just a wonderful opportunity for jealousy, "You have all of this free time. I have none," or selfishness, "I'm accustomed to just having myself to deal with during the week. I work hard but I'm not having to consider all the little people that are running around and have needs." So both of those issues unfortunately I see more than I would like because couples haven't really been realistic about how they need to change things and set things up in order to come through this kind of time not only intact but really still thriving.

Stephanie: Speaking of that thriving, I'll hang on to that. How likely is it that a relationship can be successful when there's this distance that's continuing as a factor in a relationship? It's not just once or twice. It's pretty much always.

Janet: It's hard. It can be done but moving from a single-parent household back and forth to a two-parent household, moving from a period of singleness back into a period of married-with-children, back and forth, back and forth, it can be very wearing on couples. And particularly if they feel trapped, that they have no other choices, that they can't do anything different. Those are things that really undermine that sense of purpose and choice and, "We're in this together."

The other thing that I haven't mentioned but it is a real issue is the idea of increased loneliness that can occur for both the stay-at-home person as well as the one traveling. And so issues of trust and issues of infidelity are easier to come into the picture and unfortunately easier to hide. So there has to be an awareness of these possibilities as well. but they don't have to happen.

I've worked with couples who have managed long distance relationships for extended periods of time over, in some cases, decades of their relationship. But they've been very intentional. They have felt like they made these choices, and they had other choices that were available, but this is what they selected. And then they have been very clear about doing things that would minimize the negative impact of the distance. And most of the time that changed when kids came into the picture.

Stephanie: And so that's my next air mileage packed questionnaire. What do these couples need to do to make this relationship work, I guess, like you said, for the different situations as well when children come along versus when it was the two of them or when the family is there the whole time.

Janet: Earlier on in a relationship it can be downright romantic to be in one part of the country and you meet somebody through a dating service, say, and you travel to meet one another because you're getting to know one another. But then once there's a commitment, it's harder to maintain. And once children come along it is really, really difficult. I think couples need to be realistic. If they can cut back on the travel time, I think they should. But that would be a perfect world and we don't have that. If they can't cut back on the travel, be realistic about the challenges and be very intentional about addressing them.

For instance, let me give you some practical examples because I think practical tools are very important. I like to tell my client that if I thought there was something in the Betty Crocker Cookbook that would be helpful, I would use it. So let's be practical here. The home partner needs to visit the away partner frequently and regularly because the idea of the home partner is, that is, the traveling partner already knows that world to some degree, but the home partner does not know the world of the traveling partner.

So whenever possible and I advise couples to actually budget for this and build into this routine, and this is true whether there are children or if there are no children in the home. It's also true if they're pets only in the home. Some of us love our pets like our kids and they have needs too,

and there are routines that have to be kept. So the idea of budgeting for child care and being very intentional about on a regular basis the home partner visiting the traveling partner.

When there are children, be very intentional about avoiding the splitting. Often with Skype - let's just use that as an example - kids will have Skype time with the traveling parent, then the kids go to bed and then the parents reconnect. There has to be time for just the adults to talk without the kids. Sometimes it can come, if the kids are older, at the end of the conversation. Sometimes it needs to come before.

So one parent just sort of clue the other that an issue is going to come up, you need to know about this. Here's kind of where we stand so that they can be a united front and the parent who's at home isn't feeling like they are having to do all the disciplining but they, at least, know their partner is going to have their back. So making sure that there is communication time, one to one, between the couple, both the traveling and the stay-at-home is crucial and can make a tremendous difference when there are children in the home so that from the kid's perspective parents are on the same page. They may not like it, but it can avoid that splitting that we were talking about a little bit earlier.

Stephanie: Right.

Janet: The other is to recognize that when you're living apart it is, as I mentioned earlier, very easy to be distracted by another individual and to find yourself in a compromised position, being very vigilant for the traveling parent. Being mindful that if they are going to socialize after a hard day at work - no question that they are working hard - but then they have an opportunity to choose the people with whom they socialize after work.

Being realistic, being open, being communicative with the stay-at-home spouse can really make a difference in keeping issues that could lead to jealousy and mistrust and confusion and infidelity. Those need to be addressed. We're all grown-ups and we know the things that we can do to set boundaries, and that's very important in that kind of situation, whether it's a short-term travel situation that happens frequently or whether it's extended.

What I encounter a lot is a partner will move away, but one partner will stay at home because they're wanting the kids to finish out the school year or a partner needs to move to a certain level in their career before they feel that they can transfer safely without harming their career. So in those situations it's going to be a longer period apart.

Stephanie: All right. I like what you said too about how important it is for the home spouse to travel to where the traveling spouse is. That's I guess, something not a lot of people think about because that is that added expense when you have the home they're sitting in and waiting. But that is a unique take on it, and I can see why that would be especially helpful in situations like this one. People tend to be afraid of what they don't know or curious of what they don't know, so it's a good way to resolve all that.

Janet: Absolutely. And it's part of whether you live apart or live together, really knowing about your partner's world, knowing where they're living, knowing what the community looks like, knowing and being able to see what their office looks like so that you can envision them at work. Understanding, "Oh, this is the place you like to go. This is the place you called me from when you were..." That kind of sharing of the two communities is very, very important.

Stephanie: Is there anything else that you'd like to let our guests know about the long distance relationships before we go?

Janet: I would say the biggest thing is not to minimize the challenges, not to minimize the stress. If they are older children in the home, they can really step up and take on some of that load and help around the house. Even younger children for age appropriate things can do a little bit more to be helpful.

I would encourage couples whether part of a larger family or just the two of them to really sit down together before the decision is made, that this is what they're going to do, and really honestly talk about the pros and the cons and look at those cons and say, "What can we do to address?" I've had some couples come into therapy just saying, "This is the place where the two of us can be held accountable." And I'm sitting here thinking, "Good heavens, you only have so much time together." But they were very proactive. They said, "We don't want to just think everything's going fine only to have the rug pulled out from under us."

So I would encourage couples to just be very realistic about what's going to happen and what they're going to have to deal with and then kind of check in intentionally three months, six months, so that something may have popped up and they need to address it because they didn't anticipate it.

Stephanie: Okay. Well Janet thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today.

Janet: Great. I enjoyed it, Stephanie.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Janet Savia and her practice, Sage Psychology Group, you can visit them online at sagepsychologygroup.com or call 919-472-0637 for an appointment. Thanks so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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