

Stephanie: Reducing holiday stress. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 272.

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. Is your marriage strong enough to survive holiday stress? In a perfect world the holiday season is a time of celebration and family togetherness and making memories that will last a lifetime; however, back in the real world the holiday season is a two-month marathon testing emotional, physical, and mental endurance of a marriage. Between the various family gatherings, dealing with in-laws, and trying to find the perfect gift for the ones you love, stress is available in abundance during the holidays. Even though the list of priorities keeps getting longer the days are getting shorter, and it's only a matter of time before the perfect storm that's been brewing is finally unleashed. Is your relationship strong enough to weather the holiday storm and will it fall to pieces under the weight of the holiday stress? Doctor Theresa Lewis is a licensed psychologist with Lewis Consulting Services in Raleigh, North Carolina. Dr. Lewis earned her doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of Florida. Dr. Lewis is also a parenting coordinator, conducting parenting classes for separated and divorced parents, as well as assisting separated parents to develop effective co-parenting skills and parenting plans. Welcome to the show Theresa. I'm so glad that you could join us.

Theresa: Thank you Stephanie. I'm really glad to be here.

Stephanie: What kinds of stress are typical during the holiday season?

Theresa: Well this time of year tends to be hectic for a lot of families. We're pulled in so many different directions with work, children, our partners, friends, parents, grandparents, not to mention the things that we joined initially to bring us joy such as church, and social clubs, and exercise. When you look at it, it can all feel overwhelming. So if we're not careful these things can start to feel like obligations.

Stephanie: So with stress and tensions and everything running very high around the holidays, how are couples reacting to this increased level of stress here?

Theresa: When we do things out of obligation it tends to make us feel more stressed, and so we just try to get by. So if everybody's hungry and dinner has to be made, you make dinner. Or if the phone rings, you answer it. You have an email, you answer it. You have a work deadline, you work like crazy to meet that deadline. And then what happens is we start to forget or think that we will tend to our loved ones later. It's what I call the "I'll love you tomorrow" syndrome.

Stephanie: "I'll love you tomorrow." Okay.

Theresa: And that's because love is a feeling, this is true. But it's also an action. You have to show the people who you love that you love them, and it requires you to do something. A lot of times those things are not right in front of us. We have to have an intention, we have to make an effort to do those things like stop and look into our partners' eyes, and really listen and check in, or give that nice long lingering hug, or bring a little gift.

Things like that that show that we care and that we love them.

Stephanie: So if couples can't get a handle on their stress levels, what would the resulting effects be of this "I'll love you later" syndrome?

Theresa: Right. Well stress in general the research shows, that too much stress or chronic stress definitely affects our health. It also decreases our ability to concentrate and it promotes negative thinking, and it even interferes with our ability to relax. Even when everything is all done at the end of the day, a lot of times when you're under so much stress it's hard to relax. And right there is how it affects couples because sometimes couples will say, well why can't we just relax? Why can't we just have a nice time or be together? And a lot of times the stress gets so built up in our system, it's hard. It's hard to relax and it affects our quality time.

Stephanie: So I understand that you have some advice for reducing stress during the holiday season.

Theresa: Yes. Definitely. During the holiday season and any season, but especially during the holidays there are some five key things that we can all do to get a handle on our stress and really find joy during this time.

Stephanie: I love when we have lists. I think it makes things so much more manageable just to put numbers next to them. And I know that during this time of year, our to-do lists, everyone's get longer. We get caught up in trying to get everything done and we're constantly adding to that list. So what would you advise to do in this situation as your first step in the process?

Theresa: The first step is to set some time aside to think, what is my intention? So intention is number one. During this time of year you say, what is my intention for the holidays? What impact do I want to have on my family, on my friends, on my community, and how would I like to feel during this time, and really think about that. Come up with some really concrete answers to those questions. Then with all those things that in your mind or preferably on paper that you have to do for the holidays, look at that and say, what can I drop, what does not fit with my intentions, and what would I like to add? Then when you wake up each day, take a moment and connect with your intention. Just begin each day with that intention in your mind. I say start each day with a purpose.

Stephanie: Start each day with a purpose. I like that. So when we get stressed we might think, I can't do this or this is hopeless. It's that never ending hamster wheel like you had said. What suggestions do you have for people with this doubt that it will get done?

Theresa: Right, right. Yeah, the stress definitely produces negative thinking as I mentioned earlier, and it's pretty insidious. A lot of times we're not even aware that we have that negative thought process in our mind. It's kind of like this oh, that wasn't good enough, or I'm not going to get this done, or this will never happen, or so-and-so is not going to be satisfied with this, and it's not good enough, and it really causes a lot of stress. The first thing to do is to notice that, just to notice your mind chatter, and is it supporting your intentions, is it supporting what you want to do or is it negative? Once you notice that, that is wonderful. Just praise yourself for noticing, that negative thinking that was

going on. And then with that awareness you have the chance to stop that and change that and say, oh you know what, I can do this. Or this one particular item doesn't really have to be done right now and the world will not end if it doesn't get done.

Stephanie: So going through and just realizing what your limits are and kind of verbalizing that to yourself can be that beneficial and seeing what is realistic.

Theresa: Right. Being more positive with yourself. We all know when you treat someone positively they flourish. Well it's the same thing with ourselves too, and our partner.

Stephanie: I like that. I like that. A lot of the times too around the holidays when things are stressful we think in terms of efficiency, so the sweet talk and the positive talk tends to get dropped first.

Theresa: That's true, that's true.

Stephanie: So I feel like sometimes we get caught up in the expectations of the holiday and when it comes to finding the perfect present for one another or maybe hoping our spouse has picked up the little clues and hints that we've been dropping about maybe things that we wouldn't mind seeing under the tree this year. So what would recommend doing in a situation like this with this kind of stress?

Theresa: Yes. Finding the perfect gift or receiving and wanting the perfect gift can be a stress [Inaudible 08:19] in the holidays and it really takes us away from really the true joy of the season. But along with self talk, gratitude is another tool you can put in your toolbox here that will help ease that situation. It's a subject that's received considerable attention in psychological research. If you think about it, gratitude is a great way to get into the holiday spirit and reduce stress. For some though when we think of feeling grateful, there might come a sense of indebtedness or something like that, so it's not the same as that. I've found that when thinking in terms of gratitude you can think of appreciation. Notice all the things, people, and actions that you appreciate and it doesn't matter how small. In fact, there was a study done, this pioneering experiment done at the University of California by Professor Emmons... they instructed people to keep a journal listing five things for which they felt grateful like a friend's generosity, something they'd learned, a sunset they enjoyed. And the gratitude journal was brief, just a sentence for each of the five things. After about two months there were significant effects. Compared with the control group, the people keeping the gratitude journal were more optimistic and felt happier.

Stephanie: So just verbalizing and kind of acknowledging what they appreciate helps.

Theresa: Definitely, it definitely does.

Stephanie: Okay. You've shown us how to start our day with intention but when it comes to shutting down everything, that mental to-do list at the end of the day when it's time for bed, how would you recommend doing that?

Theresa: That is a good question, because you're right. A lot of times you spend time in bed really just tossing and turning or rehearsing the things that you have to do, but right

before bed is a great time to do reflection. That's the fourth tool in your toolbox, it's called reflection. And when you're sitting down about to go to bed or laying in bed you could say, when did I act with my intention and purpose today? Think back, and if you notice something even if it's just one thing that was in line with your intention, praise yourself for that. Say yes, I did do that. That's great. And appreciate yourself for having done that. If ever there was a time that you did not act according to your intentions for the day, just notice it. You don't want to start beating yourself up about that because of course, that's just more stress. But just notice it and say okay, how can I do better tomorrow and make an intention to do that tomorrow. So when we stop to reflect on what you appreciate about your partner, that also builds connection in your relationship as well.

Stephanie: So how would you suggest handling the stress of the holidays when it just gets to that breaking point where it's overwhelming to us. And I'm assuming we'd be hitting this point if we hadn't started to institute these last four steps, but when we're hitting that point where we just feel like we can't take any more.

Theresa: Yes, the final step here is to breathe. That's number five, breathe. And of course you would think, well I'm always breathing, right? But we all must stop and do some intentional breathing. Just some nice, deep, slow breaths. Notice your body, notice your heart rate, your thoughts, are they speeding up? And that's a sign to pay attention. So when you stop and breathe that can help you to stop being so reactive to life's demands and really center in and focus on what are my intentions. So when you notice that you're being reactive, when you notice you're very stressed, your heart rate is going up higher and your mind is racing, that's a sign. You can just stop and do some nice deep, slow breaths. You can even count them to help you settle down and it works every time. It works every time. It settles your body down, it settles your mind down, and then when you're able to kind of settle down you can focus in once again on your intentions.

Stephanie: So we have the five tips here, so to quickly recap them. The first being intention, the second positive self-talk, the third would be the gratitude or appreciation, fourth would be reflection on things accomplished, and the fifth one is to just take the time and breathe. Do you have anything else that you think our listeners should know in preparing themselves for the stress of the holiday season?

Theresa: I think that the holiday season can be stressful if we lose sight of our intentions, if we lose sight of what we really want and need in our lives which include love, and joy, and connection. And when you get caught up in the busyness and the materialistic parts of the holiday season, that can really send us astray and make us feel like we're not measuring up. So really just focusing in on what the heart wants helps us there.

Stephanie: I like that. Well Theresa, thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today and teaching us everything we need to know in preparing for this upcoming holiday season.

Theresa: Great, thanks Stephanie. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Theresa Lewis and her practice Lewis Consulting Services, you can visit them online at discoverlcs.com. That's an L as in Lewis, C as in Consulting,

and S as in Services. Or you can call (919) 622-1303 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 or any of our previous episodes you can visit us online at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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