

Scott: Relationship Resolution: Be Smart. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 275.

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Recording: Welcome to stay happily married. Your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Do you have what it takes o better your relationship for the new year? The new year is a time for resolutions to create better habits for the up coming year. After all the holiday feasting we resolve to better our physical well being with a promise to eat better, exercise more and to cut out the sweets and soda. We start to kick the bad habits by deciding to quit smoking, drink less alcohol and stop biting our nails.

To improve ourselves we resolve to become more organized, reduce stress and be more independent. These are all resolutions we decide to do to better ourselves, but what can we do to better the relationship we have with our loved one for the new year? Earning her doctorate in marriage and family therapy from Texas Tech, Dr. Laura Bryan is the clinic director of Pfeiffer Institute Reach. She has over ten years of experience working with individuals, couples and families facing a wide range of issues from depression and anger, to divorce and parenting.

Dr. Bryan is an assistant professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Pfeiffer University in Raleigh. She is also the director of the Capital Chapter of the North Carolina Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Welcome to the show Laura, I'm so glad you could join us today.

Dr. Bryan: Thank you so much for the invitation.

Scott: You are most welcome. Let's jump right into this. What exactly are you seeing when it comes to couples making New Year's resolutions with one another?

Dr. Bryan: Well, a lot of times these resolutions happen at a really emotional time. Maybe you're at the New Year's party and it's midnight and you've been drinking and everybody is really happy and feeling really positive about the upcoming year, and maybe you've had that great kiss and you make this promise, this resolution. A lot of times it's gonna be just too big or too complex or too vague. You're gonna say something like, I'll never come home late again or I'm always gonna remember to pick up the dry cleaning.

Scott: Sure. Well, in that emotional state and we make these big promises or big resolutions, what problems do you see couples experiencing in a relationship when these resolutions aren't being met afterwards?

Dr. Bryan: Okay. So, you've made this big complex or vague promise, and time goes on, either you try to keep it up for a while and the it kind of drifts away or maybe you're not able to do it at all, and so what can result is some disappointment in the partner that this person didn't keep their promise, and maybe even starting to question the relationship.

There have been maybe these unrealistic expectations that the follow through, the

completion of this promise is going to be as powerful as that moment what was there at the moment where you made the resolution. And really life goes on and it's just not that exciting all the time, and that disappointment then can kind of overlay how people start to feel about each other and their relationship.

Scott: What are some of the actual negative affects of that disappointment when these unrealistic resolutions that we make aren't met?

Dr. Bryan: Right. So, you're going on with the year and these couples who've made these large unrealistic resolutions, they forget and make excuses about why they can't follow through. And maybe some of what you start to think is we can't even make time for us to accomplish this resolution, or maybe this is just as good as our relationship can be if we can't even follow through with that.

And then if nothing changes the next New Year comes around and maybe someone makes a promise again but that disappointed partner says, yeah right, prove it, and then the cycle starts again with even kind of worse expectations. And eventually the partners don't believe each others promises or intentions at all if there's no follow through.

Scott: But you say eventually, at what point in time do you see couples becoming aware that this is a problem in the relationship?

Dr. Bryan: Well, unfortunately people tend to just kind of hood stuff like that inside for a while, and so they may be realizing it individually but don't understand where their partner is at because they're not talking about it. And so sometimes it can be a while down the road, maybe even a couple of years down the road, but hopefully if people are talking maybe they'll come to realize it sooner.

Scott: This is a very unique topic, at least as far as I'm concerned. I haven't read much on it or heard much on it. have you observed any trends or patterns among couples that are having issues with their New Year's resolutions?

Dr. Bryan: Well, for better or worse it seems to be pretty equal opportunity. Newlyweds might do this because they're still kind of high on love and everything seems possible so they're making these big promises to each other. Even people who have been married for a long time, maybe they get excited about yeah, we're gonna try for a new start. So you can see it kind of in anybody at anytime.

Scott: So, we're all susceptible to this, huh?

Dr. Bryan: Absolutely.

Scott: I'm reading here that you have come up with a plan that actually helps couples make new Year's resolutions. Would you mind elaborating on that or tell us a little bit more about it?

Dr. Bryan: Sure, sure. It actually comes from the business world. They have an acronym that they use to remember how to make good goals and it's SMART, S-M-A-R-T. and it can be modified to work with personal and relationship issues too. Now one partner, just one

partner might make the resolution, but really it's more balanced if both partners can create these SMART resolutions for the relationship.

But regardless, no matter who's making the resolution it should be a joint effort with the partner so that these rules of SMART can be followed appropriately, it's gonna take some communication.

Scott: Sure. One of the problems that you mentioned earlier was that we would make these resolutions maybe in a heightened emotional state and we're not very specific about them. What is your solution to resolutions that are too vague?

Dr. Bryan: Well, it's not quite the romantic flashy moment that maybe that New Year's party is, but it's important to take some time and actually sit down with your partner and talk and then the first letter of SMART is S and in this particular goal setting activity that's gonna be for specific. You want to make these resolutions specific to your partner and your relationship not something that's just kind of abstract, too vague again, or something that just applies to what you want.

Remember this is about improving your relationship. so what that means I that each of you is gonna need to communicate what you want and communicate had two parts. One is being clear and honest about what your wants are as well as listening then to what your partner wants.

Scott: Okay. You just said being clear and honest. now I feel like we all have made some really big resolutions, at least I know I have, at one time or another that may not necessarily be achievable, and that kind of - that makes me scared sometimes to make New Year's resolutions because I over do it and I can't keep up with them or I'm afraid to tell my significant other about the New Year's resolutions. What do you suggest to do when resolutions are too grandiose?

Dr. Bryan: Well, SMART has an answer for that too, so after being specific you need to make them manageable. So there's the M. The resolution, it doesn't have to be flashy, it doesn't have to be big, in fact it's easier to accomplish if it's small and simple and that can make a really big difference for your relationship, maybe even more so than those big flashy ones.

So, the other thing that you need to consider about manageable is something that won't take a great deal of additional resources and most of the time when people say resources you immediately think about money but the other thing we're usually short on is time, so it needs to be manageable in both time and finances. If it takes too much of either of those then it's way too easy to make excuses and put it off until you' have more time or more money which just never seems to happen.

Scott: If we have the time and we have the money, even beyond that, keeping these resolutions often takes a lot of work and discipline. What is your advice for when these New Year's resolutions start to be taken for granted or even expected out of each other?

Dr. Bryan: Right. So, nobody wants to be taken for granted or just kind of assumed that you're going to be doing this, so the A in SMART is for acknowledge. And what that means is

that you're going to acknowledge when your partner does what she or he promised, the receiving person should acknowledge that kept promise, don't just let it go by. You need to find some way that you can acknowledge it. It, again, doesn't have to be huge, it can just be a thank you or maybe a hug or a note that you write or my personal favorite the...

Scott: And since they are really such hard work at times, how do you suggest that couples - because this is kind of unique for couples, not just individuals, keep up with the resolutions? I mean what can they do to make sure that each part of that resolution is getting met?

Dr. Bryan: Right, so the R in SMART is resolve, and this is going to be something that you do for the benefit of your relationship. Once that newness wears off it becomes more difficult to make yourself follow through. And we're human, we don't tend to repeat things that aren't supported or rewarded. And that's where the acknowledgement from your partner really comes in, that's a great reward to get, but you can also reward yourself for following through.

You know, you've done it solid for a month, whatever it was that you had promised to do, and so maybe you let yourself sleep in a little bit on a Saturday or you get a small treat for snack that you wouldn't usually let yourself have. Some way to kind of help staunch up that resolve.

Scott: I really like your program, you're throwing out some kisses and rewards, sounds great.

Dr. Bryan: Absolutely.

Scott: New Year's resolutions I've noticed, for example the gym, and January 2nd the gym is packed. And usually by about February or March it's back to being almost empty, but we do make these resolutions usually for the entirety of the year. What is your solution to making these relationship resolutions be remembered or carried out or done throughout the year?

Dr. Bryan: Okay. So the very end of SMART then it stands for time, the T stands for time. And you can think about it in a couple of different ways. one is how often is this resolution going to occur? If it is, you know, I'm going to take out the trash, is that something that's going to happen on a weekly basis? Is it something that you're going to be doing daily, like when I come home I'm going to give you a hug and a kiss before I go sit down and watch TV?

So spelling that out, how much time it's going to take and when in time, first daily or weekly, maybe monthly, it needs to be something that happens fairly often because then you're going to get to have that acknowledgment.

But timing is also important. You don't want to try to be fulfilling your resolution with your partner when they're distracted. Maybe they're watching TV or taking care of the kids or one or both of you is tired. A lot of times couples, you know, the only time that they really get to spend just the two of them is after the kids have gone to bed and everybody's had a full day, nobody's at their best. And so you want to time your fulfillment of those resolutions so that not only do you feel good giving it but your

partner feels good receiving and acknowledging.

Scott: Yeah, timing is so important. I had a mentor of mine that taught me that early on that communication is not only learning how to ask for certain things but also learning when to ask for certain things.

Dr. Bryan: Absolutely.

Scott: I feel like we've kind of - I've asked you a lot of questions concerning the negatives that these resolutions might bring about. So, let's go out on a good note, what are some of the positive effects that can occur when couples take these five steps to create in their New Year's resolutions? Because I really like this idea of doing a New Year's resolution as a couple together, so what are some of the positive effects of following these five steps?

Dr. Bryan: Well, it's kind of the flip side of what we were talking about earlier on contrast to disappointment and maybe not believing your partner anymore, the more opportunities you have to follow through in a positive way, to keep your promise, to really start doing those even small things that can really make a difference for your relationship, they really add up.

And the more opportunities you have to acknowledge your partner, have something to say to or about them, research has shown can really make a big difference for your relationship, it can kind of help shore you up for those times when things aren't going very well. Plus you're actually getting things done so kind of like the gym example you were giving earlier, you're probably feeling pretty good about yourself as well.

Scott: Yeah, that's great. This is such a great topic and it's got me already very excited about the New Year's and I'm sure as a lot of our listeners are as well. Is there anything else that our listeners should know or myself about this topic?

Dr. Bryan: Well, if you wanted to get kind of creative you could add an extra T to SMART, remember it's been specific, manageable, making acknowledgements, resolve, time and then another T would be talk and this of course I one that as therapists we're always pushing for couples to be talking with each other. Again, honestly, really listening to each other. As far as resolutions go, you need to talk when it's working and you need to talk when it's not.

The only way that things can get better is if your partner knows where you are and you can each understand what you want and need from the relationship, and if you're having trouble being able to do that, and it can be really hard, then do consider going to a therapist, somebody who's trained to help facilitate those conversations.

Scott: Absolutely. This has been so interesting. Laura, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Dr. Bryan: No problem, it's been fun.

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Scott: To find out more about Dr. Bryan and her practice, Pfeiffer Institute Reach, you can visit their website and www.PfeifferReach.org, or call 919-941-2900 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 previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair, until next time, stay happily married.

Recording: 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 or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.

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