

Stephanie Lockwood: Five steps to better mental health. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 268.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married.

Male: Happily married . . . happily married.

Announcer: 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. Conflict is a part of life. Do you and your spouse know how to handle the stress? Stress is all around us all of the time. We have family responsibilities, hectic schedules, and a never-ending to-do list, and it makes it difficult for couples to slow down and take a breath. When stressful situations arise, how do you keep your cool?

When we add stress on top of stress, it compounds and it festers until it's dealt with. Couples often lose sight of themselves and focus on various distractions and priorities that consume their lives. When we can't take the time out for ourselves and we can't dedicate time to our relationship, our mental health suffers. Go ahead and put yourself and your relationship first and de-stress from the chaos in life with these five very simple steps.

Founder of Cognitive Psychiatry of Chapel Hill, Dr. Jennie Byrne, is a board-certified psychiatrist specializing in adult cognitive issues like dementia, attention deficit, and anxiety disorders. Dr. Byrne works with individuals and couples to optimize mood and thinking patterns that promote self-improvement and goal achievement. Earning her doctorate in neurophysiology from NYU School of Medicine, Dr. Byrne completed her residency at the prestigious Mt. Sinai School of Medicine. Welcome to the show, Jennie. I'm really glad you could join us today.

Dr. Jennie Byrne: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Stephanie: So just so we can make sure that we're all on the same page, can you describe exactly what mental health encompasses?

Dr. Byrne: Sure. I encourage people to think about their brain as the way they would other parts of their body. So mental health has to do with everything that is making your brain operate in a healthy way. And what does that mean? Well, when we think about mental health, typically we think about things like mood, like depression or anxiety or more serious problems like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but that's not all that it includes.

Mental health includes things like thinking, cognition, how well you're able to process information. If you're using substances, that is having a big impact on your brain, so substance abuse is often considered part of mental health. And then just kind of day-to-

day coping skills that help us get through life with optimal functioning, that's something our brain does as well. So pretty much anything the brain does relates to mental health.

Stephanie: And so what role does mental health play in maintaining that wellbeing?

Dr. Byrne: Again, since the brain is an organ of the body, I encourage people to think about it the same way they would other organs. So if your heart isn't working very well, you're not going to feel well. You're going to have problems getting oxygen around. You're going to feel fatigued. You're not going to do very well. Similarly, if your brain is not functioning well, the rest of your body isn't going to work either. If you're depressed, your body is going to tend to be sluggish or irritable. You maybe don't want to eat. You have poor sleep. So our brain is very tightly linked to the rest of our body, and if our mental health is poor, our physical wellbeing is going to be poor as well.

Stephanie: And so more relationship setting and, I guess, even individuals kind of cohabitating, what are some of the stressors that have a damaging effect on wellbeing and therefore our mental health then?

Dr. Byrne: So everyone's different, and something that's a stressor for one person may not be for another. However, some of the most common things that cause stress in people's lives are things like transitions. So even though it can be very exciting and positive, things like moving to a new place, getting a new job, getting married, having a child, any of these transitions can be very stressful.

And then you kind of have more chronic stressors like a job that's too demanding where you're not getting enough sleep and you're never getting rested and you're kind of always under stress, or interpersonal conflict and that could be at work but it could also be at home. So if your relationship is under a lot of conflict on a regular basis, that is also going to cause a lot of stress. So it's different for everybody, but certainly some of the common ones are transitions and chronic conflict.

Stephanie: How does someone's mental health . . . I know you said it can affect, you know, their physical, their kind of state of mind, but how does someone's wellbeing affect their relationship? What are some of the, I guess, both positive and negative things that you'll see when people are kind of suffering from a poor mental health state?

Dr. Byrne: So this is where maybe the brain is a little bit different than the rest of our body. If our body is not functioning well like if your heart is not functioning well, it may not be obvious to someone else. It may not affect your relationship with someone else. But if your brain is not functioning well, it is going to have a huge impact in your relationship, and the reason is that the brain is the organ that does social relationships, right? The brain is the organ that helps us understand social cues, that helps us have empathy, that has feelings towards other people, that has memories of other people. So if your brain is not functioning well, it's going to have a huge impact on your relationship whether it be in a marriage or family or any other kind of relationship.

Stephanie: And so you've created five tips to help individuals-and we're applying it here to couples as well-stay healthy and to stay happy. So what is your first step?

Dr. Byrne: So these five tips are just kind of some basic ideas to get started. One of the first tips I say is to take time to do things that you enjoy. And this sounds kind of obvious, I think, to people, but if you talk to people as I do in the office, often you find out they're really not taking time to do things they enjoy, that this has become a very low priority for them in their lives.

And if you think about the brain and what's happening in the brain, when you do things that you enjoy, your brain is releasing chemicals. One of the chemicals is serotonin, and this is one of the chemicals that helps keep your mood stabilized. So if you're never doing anything you enjoy, you're not releasing as much serotonin. You may end up getting more depressed or down in the dumps. So, again, this sounds like kind of common sense, but I think that people really forget this in their day-to-day life.

Stephanie: When practicing this step as a couple, what can spouses do if they do enjoy spending their time in different ways from one another?

Dr. Byrne: And this can be hard because if you're working, maybe you don't get that much time together. You feel like you have to spend every minute together to kind of maximize that time.

Stephanie: Right.

Dr. Byrne: And that's not always true. You know, I think everybody does need some personal time which isn't at work, which isn't with the spouse, which isn't with their kids. Now that doesn't have to be, you know, days at a time or even hours at a time. It can be 15 minutes. Sometimes even just taking 15 minutes to yourself on your own can be very restorative. So I think it's okay to do activities on your own. And, again, it doesn't have to take up all your time. It's not like if you take 15 minutes to yourself, you're not going to have time to be with your spouse, your significant other, or your kids.

Another thing to think about is whether doing an activity that you don't always enjoy doing can help strengthen the relationship, so as kind of a form of compromise, trying new things, being open-minded. Sometimes if you tag along with your spouse, and they're doing something you don't enjoy, I mean, you're really showing them with your behavior that you are motivated to be with them and that you're motivated to support them in what they enjoy. So I think if you can find a balance of these things, time to do things on your own that you enjoy, maybe a little compromise where you do things they enjoy, that's probably a healthy way to go about it.

Stephanie: I think that's the one rule of thumb, you always hear couples getting that piece of advice before they married. Marriage is all about compromise, so it's pretty fitting. So I'd say this list is off to a good start. It doesn't seem like there's anything very difficult or daunting, you know. You're telling people to do what they love to do, so that seems

simple enough to implement. What about relationships in general? I know you have step three here relating to this.

Dr. Byrne: Uh-huh. So another tip here is to connect with people in a meaningful way. This is something, I think, that sounds a little easier than it is in reality. So what is a meaningful way? A meaningful way is something that has meaning to you. It may not be the same for everybody. Some people find connecting through church to be very meaningful. Other people don't. Some people find playing sports like a sports team is very meaningful.

It's really very individual. But when you feel that sense of connection with someone that you have that empathy for each other, you feel like you're on the same page, you feel like the other person kind of gets you and you get them, that feeling of connection again releases really positive chemicals in the brain, and it gives you a much richer sense of relationship. So whether that's your spouse or other people, having that meaningful connection is important. And, again, this is something that sometimes gets deprioritized in our day-to-day life.

Stephanie: Yeah. I do think that's something . . . it falls to the wayside. We don't think it's as important. We rather check those things off our to- do list than, I guess, really connect with people. And I find this to be an issue with me, this next tip here, and I'm positive that others feel the same way, too. But I'm always trying to think ten steps ahead of whatever I'm doing in hopes that it'll work out in my favor, maybe I won't have so much to do. And, again, I've been doing this for years and years, and I haven't ever been able to catch up. So what would you recommend with addressing this issue for these people that just can't stop thinking in the future?

Dr. Byrne: So obviously thinking ahead can be helpful at times, but what a lot of people find themselves is just caught up in always thinking ahead and having difficulty being in the moment. And there's kind of a lot of media buzz about this word "mindfulness" right now, and it's a pretty simple concept. The idea of mindfulness is the ability to be in the moment, to be feeling in the moment, to be thinking in the moment. And it's something that seems very easy but is very, very difficult for most people.

And there are different exercises that you can do to practice mindfulness. You know, you'll see there are many, many different things online. There are classes. There are breathing exercises. There's meditation. There's yoga. There are many different ways, but they all have the same goal, which is to practice your level of self-awareness in the moment. And it's something that is very difficult, but if you practice it, it tends to get easier. And you may only be able to achieve it for a minute at a time, but if you keep working at it, you can often get up to, you know, 5 minutes, 15 minutes.

And it's probably not realistic to think you'll always be in the moment and you won't be thinking all the things you've got to do on your to-do list and kind of strategizing for the future, but if you can work just a little bit of this into your every day, people find that this

is very calming, and this has a really positive impact. If you're able to do it with the person that you care about, it can also be a really good way to strengthen your relationship. But having said that, I know it's very difficult, and I think that's why you see so many classes and guides on how to do this because it does not come naturally for many people.

Stephanie: We have just recently, and we've done this a few times, but we do cover that topic of mindfulness, and I know even a few years ago when I was starting with Stay Happily Married, I had no idea what that was. But it's something that applies to kind of every facet of life, so it is something that is little known, I think, still at this point but really kind of essential because it's strange how we as humans don't really know how to interact on that kind of deeper level. You'd think it would be one of those natural things.

And I know in our introduction here, we talked all about your background, and like you, I'm not from North Carolina either. I'm from up North, but it means that I've spent a lot of my vacation time going back to my hometown and visiting with my family, and it's always been a running joke that one day maybe I'll actually take a vacation as it's meant to be and all my time off from work and whatever else will kind of be something that's meant to be relaxing. Now things like this, though, family obligations or, you know, weekend house projects, anything that you have going on, they're just some of the stressors that we had touched on before. Now for people who are having this kind of issue prioritizing, what can we do to combat this?

Dr. Byrne: The fourth tip here is to rest, refresh, and rejuvenate. And when thinking about vacation, my thing is that if your kids are with you, it's not a vacation.

Stephanie: I like that.

Dr. Byrne: So we do a lot of trips. In terms of an actual vacation, that's much more challenging. So obviously an ideal vacation is when you truly are by yourself or with your spouse and you don't have responsibilities. You're unplugged. You don't have to answer the phone. You don't have to check your email. You don't have to cook. You don't have to clean. You're just really on vacation. Now that doesn't always happen, and it sometimes is not realistic, to be honest.

So if you can do that, that's wonderful. But if you can't, there are still ways to do this on a smaller scale. So maybe you can't take a week off to go on a trip somewhere and do nothing for a week. But maybe you can take five hours on Sunday afternoon and go off and do something restful and turn off your phone and turn off your email. Or, you know, maybe even an hour that you can go somewhere in your house that's quiet and private and just have an hour to yourself.

So the vacation is really the ideal, and we all should probably get those from time to time. But even if you can't do that, if you can take time to just rest, refresh, rejuvenate. And, again, this is different for everyone what that means, but the main idea is that you just don't really have responsibilities during that time. It's really a time to kind of decompress.

So whatever you can get in, get it in. Even if it's 15 minutes, it's still better than nothing. And that's . . . when I talk to people in the office, a lot of, you know, what we work on, we start small and maybe we only work on 5, 10, 15 minutes at a time to get started.

Stephanie: I like that, though. And we're up to . . . that was the fourth tip. Now we have one more. I'm very curious. What's this last, fifth tip of ours?

Dr. Byrne: So the last tip is kind of what do you do if this all sounds good and you try it but it doesn't work? And that is to get help. And this can be professional help. This can be not professional help. If you have someone in your life that's there that can help you kind of get through in a better way that you need to talk and vent to, by all means, reach out to that person.

But if you are trying to get past some of the stress or having trouble in the relationship and you really are not getting anywhere, sometimes asking for professional help is a very simple and efficient solution. And sometimes talking to a neutral party can answer questions much faster than it would if you were trying to answer them on your own. And this is just kind of true for everyone including me. You know, I can't see things in my life as clearly as perhaps an outsider could.

So I really recommend reaching out and getting help, especially we're entering the holiday season, and stressors run high for everybody. But we find here in the practice that holidays just can be a very difficult time of year. So if you need professional help, please don't hesitate and please ask.

Stephanie: So is there anything else that you think our listeners should know about better mental health and better mental wellbeing before we go today?

Dr. Byrne: Again, I would just emphasize think about your brain as part of your body. It's an organ like anything else. It responds to exercise, so doing mindfulness is a kind of exercise. Doing, you know, memory tasks is a type of exercise. Learning how to regulate your mood is a kind of exercise.

If you work with your brain and you exercise it, it's going to do better. And there's no reason to think that you can't make your brain work better, and that, in turn, will give you more balance in your life and your relationship. So I'd really encourage people to think about the brain as part of their body and to try some of these things. And if all else fails, just reach out for help.

Stephanie: Well, Jennie, thank you so much for taking the time and being with us on the show today. We appreciate having you here.

Dr. Byrne: Thank you again for having me.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Jennie Byrne and her practice,

Cognitive Psychiatry of Chapel Hill, you can visit her website at cognitive-psychiatry.com, or you can call 919-636-5240 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, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married.

Male: Happily married . . . happily married.

Announcer: 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.