

Stephanie: Let's get physical. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 270.

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. How can your commitment to health affect your commitment to the one that you love? Summertime is meant for lounging by the beach and enjoying the sun and trying to avoid showing the entire world your every physical insecurity. Come autumn the temperatures drop, the leaves change, and everyone's best friend, the oversized sweater, makes its triumphant return from the depths of the closet.

Just because the temperatures are dropping, that doesn't necessarily mean that your waistline will, too. With the colder temperatures come the hectic, sleepless schedule filled with all of the holiday parties and filling, filling holiday meals with their seemingly limitless supply of every artery clogging treat that your struggling heart can handle.

While many resolve to make up for their holiday splurging with a promise to do better next year, it may not be only your body that's paying the price for your poor physical health. While your gym membership and a full eight hours of sleep may have been a top priority for you when you were unattached, a committed relationship, work, or even children can have a way of taking time away from the things that were once considered essential.

The black coffee in your hand and the soaring three digits on the scale don't lie. As those numbers get higher, so do your chances of marital dissatisfaction. How can better physical health lead to better marital health? Dr. Kristen Wynns is a child and adolescent psychologist who owns a specialty private practice in Cary, North Carolina, called Wynns Family Psychology. She earned her PhD and Masters in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro.

And Dr. Wynns has been frequently sought out as a local expert on child psychology and parenting for radio shows, magazines like "Carolina Parent," as well as TV shows like, "My Carolina Today" and "Daytime." Dr. Wynns has also founded the parenting website, NoWimpyParenting.com," providing services for parents struggling with behavior and discipline problems.

Married for 15 years with two young children of her own, Dr. Wynns likes to say that she's doubly qualified to offer parenting and marriage advice. Welcome back to the show, Kristen. I'm really glad you could join us again today.

Kristen: Thank you.

Stephanie: What are the items that you have that make up your physical health?

Kristen: Whenever I'm working with families or couples, I often tell them before we can get to the high level psychological stuff, I really believe that exercise and sleep and diet are the foundations for overall health, and a lot of people don't necessarily link those things to

psychological health or to marital health. But from my experience there's a very close connection between the physical benefits of exercise and good sleep and a healthy diet and marital satisfaction and well-being.

Stephanie: The sleep, the exercise, these are all activities that are performed by the individual. So how exactly does this play a role in affecting the health of a relationship?

Kristen: A lot of people might not necessarily make that connection from the very beginning if you just think about it casually, but couples that are as individuals and healthy come to the relationship already with benefits for their mood and their psychological well-being. And, of course, that trickles down into the marriage to help their communication improve, their time together be of higher quality, their enjoyment of each other and spending time. It's amazing the connection that might not be obvious from the outset.

Stephanie: So the couples that you're speaking with, what are some of the issues that you're seeing from them not making the physical health, the sleep, the exercise, a priority in their lives.

Kristen: It's interesting. I actually recently worked with a couple who are in a pretty difficult spot, and the one spouse mentioned that his top concern really is his wife's weight gain over the last three years. And it wasn't just the obvious that it might affect their attraction to each other, but it was really complex with how her weight gain implied perhaps giving up on herself, perhaps giving up on their relationship. Of course, her sex drive and self-esteem would be affected.

It's really interesting once you start to peel back the layers of the onion how when couples are struggling you can trace it back to some of these physical things that we're going to be talking about today, how that's very much a part of the problem.

Stephanie: These couples that you're seeing who are having these issues or are finally recognizing what these issues are stemming from, are there any particular trends in terms of the age of the couple or the length of the marriage that relate to this issue at all?

Kristen: I've really seen it as more of the universal issue that any couple can be vulnerable to. There can be young couples that are really neglecting their health and overly stressed, and their marriage is suffering as a result.

Sometimes even individuals who don't necessarily look overweight or out of shape, sometimes if you still analyze their habits and their sleep habits and what they're fueling their bodies with and their lack of exercise, sometimes, if you really look, more of the internal effects of that you'll see that you can't even necessarily base things on appearance. I find it's really something that all couples need to be on the look out for.

Stephanie: If we put our physical health first and we make an effort to routinely exercise, as well as get enough shut-eye, what are some of the benefits that a couple or individuals could expect?

Kristen: Well, there are several. One of the first ones that comes to mind is energy. There's just a known link between getting regular exercise and having increased energy and less fatigue. People who are active and fit are going to be more energetic in general during their day.

Of course, when we're linking this back to the relationship, if you are energetic and healthy with your activity level, you're going to be able to spend some time with your spouse at the end of the day and not just immediately crash on the couch and not be heard from for the rest of the night.

Energy, increased self-confidence, of course, is very much linked to exercise and healthy diet but, of course, also to the marriage. A lot of people assume that having good self-esteem is maybe linked to other people telling you that you look good or you're a good person, but self-esteem really comes from that sense of satisfaction you get for yourself when you analyze that you're in a healthy place in your life and you're feeling good about your body, good about the way you take care of your body.

And that's going to directly feed back into the marriage where if you're self-confident and feel good about yourself, you're going to be more free in your sexual relationship, and you're going to give off a very attractive vibe to your partner even if you've been together for a while. So self-confidence is another fringe benefit for sure.

Stephanie: I don't think I've ever been to a gym. I've seen a lot of things at a gym, but I've never seen two people running together on a treadmill, or there's just certain things that don't seem to correlate as a partner activity especially when you have your iPod strapped to your arm with your music blaring. And they have those personal TV screens now even, a few inches from your face, so you don't have to interact with anything around you.

This is, again, another piece of this puzzle that seems like a very individualized activity, and how could this be used? This physical wanting to exercise and improve your physical health, how could that be used to improve the relationship?

Kristen: Well, of course, it can still work if you're going and working out separately and coming back together. Of course, you'll still have those benefits, but a lot of couples don't realize until you've experimented with it some that exercising together is a win-win because you're still both getting all the great benefits of exercise.

It's also a really great way to bond emotionally. If you have a tough workout together or even if you're just taking a long walk and you're finally able to talk about deeper things and just putting out the fires of your day, which a lot of us spend our time doing when we get with our spouse. We're just firing off a to-do list.

Exercising and being able to talk and have the benefit of both of you having your endorphin rush hit together where you both leave in a good mood and, of course, it would spill over into having your sexual chemistry aligned if you just had a great workout, so I definitely encourage couples to do that every so often even if you like to be on your treadmill to take time out every so often to go and play tennis or go on a walk or go on a bike ride together.

The other part that I mentioned, of course, is exercise is known to increase both partner's sex drive and your physical intimacy with each other. For a lot of couples, you're not only getting the individual benefit to your health, but it's helping the emotional and the physical parts of your relationship.

Stephanie: I can just imagine the whole other discussion we could have on pheromones and things related to this. As a couple, we're more energized. We're feeling confident and we're doing that as a unit while sex and intimacy may be one of the best motivators, I think, anyone could ever create in this battle of the sexes that we have going on. Are there any other benefits to the relationship that can come from this exercise?

Kristen: Sure. I tell individuals and couples all the time how exercise has really been shown to be as effective as antidepressants in a lot of cases for battling depression. I recommend that all the time that there's known benefits to decreasing depression and improving your mood and reducing stress. It's documented.

It's been well researched that exercise is extremely important, and we all know that if there are two stressed out people who try to come together again at the end of the day, if you're stressed out, you're going to be more likely to get into little arguments, to taking out your bad temper on the other one. If both of you are making the effort to regularly exercise, your stress levels are going to be much better managed, and the idea would be the coming together with a much better positive mood and outlook.

Stephanie: Exercise has the ability to energize us and wake us up, but it can also make us fall asleep. What can waking up on the wrong side of the bed actually mean for a marriage?

Kristen: What's nice about these three elements that I call the foundation of a healthy person and in a healthy marriage the sleep, diet, and exercise, it's got a really nice cyclical effect where if you're exercising regularly, your sleep is going to be much better sleep, higher quality, and you should have an easier time falling asleep and staying asleep.

For couples who really are making the effort to get good sleep again, that's going to feed into your mood, where you're going to be in a better mood. You're going to have more energy, less fatigue and again, that's going to feed right back into your relationship in a really positive way especially if both of you are making that effort to get regular sleep. And these days we've had some interesting studies that have come out that try to nail the target amount of sleep, and seven hours is the number that keeps getting tossed around. That's a great goal for individuals to set is trying to get that seven hours minimum of sleep a night.

Stephanie: That's news. It's not eight. I feel like I've been lied to for so many years. I feel so dissatisfied.

Kristen: Well, eight is still probably the average they say. There's really good cool research with weight loss and with life expectancy and heart health and all kinds of good things where seven seems to be a magical number for the minimum you need to be aiming for.

Stephanie: I feel much more reassured in the very little sleep that I do get. I feel much better now.

Kristen: Oh good.

Stephanie: I'm sure I'm not the only one but whenever you go to bed you have an issue turning it off, and that's what creates this sleep problem. Whenever you're supposed to be relaxing your mind is racing. You're stressed or thinking about all the things you didn't do today that you have to get done tomorrow. How can couples combat something like this to get all this much needed rest?

Kristen: There are a few simple tips that can really go a long way to help. I always discuss bedtime routine, and a lot of times adults think wait a minute that's just for kids that you need to have your bedtime routine. It's just as important for adults to have a regular relaxing bedtime routine. Quiet activities are important, reading a book or listening to music.

Taking a hot shower or bath is great because there's something magical, not really magical I'm sure that it's got a physiological basis, but when you come out of a hot bath and your body's core temperature starts to cool off it makes you sleepy. That's why a lot of times having a hot bath as part of your routine helps.

In addition, what not to do is important. If you're trying to do last minute work or paying bills or having an important discussion with your spouse that's stressful, that's going to make your system go on high alert instead of getting relaxed.

I often recommend to adults to shut down all the productive stuff and especially shut down your screens because there's known research that anything with a screen, TVs, laptops, even smart phones, suppresses the hormone that makes us sleepy. It suppresses your melatonin.

So even having your digital alarm clock, the light from that can have the same effect. So I sometimes recommend to adult to turn your clock so that the numbers aren't facing toward your bed. Honestly, that sounds silly, but it can make a big difference in your ability to relax and get sleepy.

Stephanie: I guess that's true. You're always looking at the clock counting down how much time you have left whenever you see the light. That's genius.

Kristen: That's right. Your environment is important, too. Having a cool and dark room is important. I'm one of those that has to have my white noise machine on blasting fairly loud because I can hear every little sound. It's important you know what kinds of things you need to stay asleep and fall asleep and have those in place.

Have your good high quality pillow and mattress that's not too old, having noise in the background if you need that. All those things, having your room set up for successful sleep. There are things that people don't always think about, but they can really do a lot to help you get in that relaxed state.

Stephanie: If the goal is sleep here, like you said, having a nice flat screen glowing at the other end of the bed isn't really beneficial in this equation. Now, I know designing rooms you always hear the women typically commenting about how they don't want a TV in the bedroom. What have you seen with this men versus women on a flat screen at the end of the bed, this battle?

Kristen: Yeah. Unfortunately for the men again, there is pretty clear consensus that the bedroom should really be for sleeping and sex and that's about it. I know that's hard for all of us to do. It's tempting to let your laundry pile creep onto your bed or your bills beside the bed or that nice TV, but as much as possible if you and your spouse could try to stick to just keeping the bedroom that sanctuary, again, where it's peaceful and just for sleep and sex.

That's really the ideal for your marriage and for being able to immediately relax. As soon as you walk in your room if you're really holding to that, your body should have a noticeable relaxed reaction. As soon as you walk in if you've really been trying to hold to that.

Stephanie: I think that's a negotiation that many people would be willing to let go of the TV for sleep and sex. I don't think that's a bad deal.

Kristen: I think so.

Stephanie: We know why we should sleep. We know where we should sleep, and we know how we should sleep, but how do couples actually make that transition from day to night?

Kristen: It's important with all of our talk about how important exercise is. It is important, again, for you to have a time of the evening that you switch over into that relaxing routine, and it's important to have exercise finish preferably, at least, three hours before bed, if not longer, because it takes a while for your body to come down from exercise, and it's important your body has enough time for your temperature to drop again which makes you sleepy.

I recommend it's not ideal for you to get in that last work-out in the evening time because that could affect your sleep. Similar advice with caffeine. Some people swear that they can have coffee or tea right before bed and while that may be true, most individuals are going to be influenced by caffeine even three, four, five hours before bed. Ideally, you would have your last caffeine boost in the afternoon and then avoid it before bed. So, again, your body can be set up in the most ideal scenario to fall asleep easily.

Stephanie: Yeah. Caffeine is one of those tricky ones. It never works when you want it to. It only works when you really don't need it to.

Kristen: I know.

Stephanie: It's tricky. I think all of our listeners will be very well rested and energized long before the New Year resolutions kick in. Is there anything else that our listeners should know about their physical health?

Kristen: Sure. Two more tips. One is we've hit on almost every component of a healthy marriage except for the spiritual part. Depending on couple's faith orientation, there's all kinds of great studies from marriage experts that show that praying together or sharing other spiritual, religious activities are a great way to increase intimacy.

Really if you have the spiritual intimacy and physical and emotional intimacy, you are going to be a very strong couple. Praying together, doing devotions, that kind of thing is great. Then, finally, we haven't talked too much about nutrition. We could probably do an entire podcast just on that but, of course, eating healthy is going to affect your mood and your sleep as well as the exercise that we've already talked about.

A few interesting tips that I have recently discovered that are pretty helpful and easy to incorporate into your diet. Zinc is a great mineral that helps with your mood and your sexual function. You can find that in animal based proteins but also in cashews and almonds, and I saw something else with cashews being a great natural antidepressant. Grab a handful of cashews every day can help your sex life and your mood. They would be a super nut, so to speak. Zinc is great.

Everybody jokes about having oysters on an important date, but there really is research connecting oysters and clams and scallops to a rise in your testosterone and estrogen, and we all know that's going to help with your sexual desire. That's not just a myth. That is a great food to have on a special date or just an ordinary dinner.

Finally, red wine has been linked to women, in particular, and increasing their sexual desires. Having a glass or two of red wine, we already know the benefits to the heart have been well documented, but it's also been linked to women's sexual desire.

Stephanie: Now the marketing scheme that bars employ with the booze and the nuts sitting in a bowl. They're making so much more sense now.

Kristen: Right.

Stephanie: Kristen, thank you so much for coming back and speaking with us again and letting us know how important our physical health for our relationship. Thank you.

Kristen: Sure. Have fun eating healthy and exercising.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns and her practice, Wynns Family Psychology, you can visit their website at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. That's W-Y-N-N-S family psychology.com, or you can call 919-467-7777 for an appointment.

For information regarding the services available to help parents struggling with behavior or discipline problems at home, you can visit Dr. Wynns' other site, NoWimpyParenting.com. 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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