

Scott: Is your negative outlook affecting your relationship? This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 305.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your negative outlook affecting your relationship? With life's many ups and downs it can be hard to keep a positive attitude every day. Whether it be at work or at home, bad things happen all the time. You may be struggling to get along with your boss, having to deal with [inaudible 00:00:46] deadlines, having to deal with people [inaudible 00:00:51] at work. At home your dog may have made a mess in the house, the kids may be bouncing off the walls, or maybe a pipe was busted and flooded your kitchen. Any of these issues can make a good day turn bad in the blink of an eye. When bad events happen in your life, some people are quick to turn negative and it may be difficult to keep a positive attitude in such trying times. Does your negative outlook affect your relationship? What can we do to help our relationships have a nice, positive outlook?

Earning his license in marriage and family therapy from East Carolina University, Kevin Rutter is owner and founder of Growing Tree Counseling Center in North Carolina. He is also a certified professional life coach. His training has included psychotherapy and systems therapy. Kevin began his clinical experience in counseling in 1996 and has over 10 years experience in employee assistance programs. He has taught as a student professor at ECU and has extensive experience in corporate and community coaching, providing leadership training, group presentations, and professional coaching. Kevin is an approved supervisor qualified to train other therapists for licensure. Additionally, he was featured many times on a local radio station in Cincinnati and has published articles for a magazine. Kevin also serves on the board for Catawba Valley Association of Professional Counselors and Therapists. Welcome to the show, Kevin. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Kevin: Thank you.

Scott: Well Kevin, you are here today to discuss the power of positive thinking in relationships and how our outlook, whether it be positive or negative, about our partner affects the outcome. So would you mind taking a minute and kind of elaborating a little bit on how our thinking affects our relationships?

Kevin: Sure. You know, in general, what we communicate, whether it's verbal or nonverbal, affects the way we see other people and it starts with what we think. So if we think, for example, negative things about our partner, that's going to affect the way we communicate to them, whether it's verbal or nonverbal. And just to give you an example, they recently did a research study where they found that with baseball players, those that focused on hitting home runs actually increased or improved and those that worried about striking out tended to strike out more. And this of course applies to any situation, especially relationships. And John Gottman [SP] who's one of the leading researchers on what affects relationships says that we need a five to one ratio of positives to negatives, just for a relationship to survive. For a relationship to thrive, it needs to be even higher than that, closer to ten to one.

Scott: Now, are you talking about thought patterns, like for every negative thought that we kind of have towards our partner we need ten positive thoughts to have that be a thriving relationship?

Kevin: Yeah, to be even clearer about it, it's kind of like, when John Gottman did his research, he's looking at actual interaction, but I'm suggesting that that interaction starts with how we think.

Scott: Okay.

Kevin: So it kind of is a both [inaudible 00:04:10].

Scott: Gotcha. Well what problems do you see that couples are experiencing in the relationships when the ratio of negative to positive like we're discussing is not what it should be?

Kevin: Well there's several things that can happen. One common scenario is people who are looking for evidence that their partner would fail them. For example, someone who's been in a failed relationship in the past and has a fear of repeating that same experience, they will tend to look for those signs that the current partner is going to hurt them again. And some common things that you might hear is people say things like, you know, "If you really loved me you would 'blank'," or, "I shouldn't have to ask for these things," or, "I know you don't care and you don't understand me because 'blank'." And in these situations the partner is trying to get the other person to read their minds and to address their inner wounds without having to ask for the things that they need. This kind of expecting your spouse to wound you again actually can create scenarios where they actually do. And so this self-perpetuating problem creates self-fulfilling prophecies.

Another common challenge is when we focus on what we don't like about our partner. For example, and this is a stereotype but it seems to be a pretty accurate one, women tend to talk about sharing feelings while men talk about trying to fix things. And the research shows that 94 percent of the problems couples have never get resolved. So maybe marriage isn't so much about fixing each other and maybe it's more about learning how to accept each other. In fact, often when we try to fix our partner, our very attempts to do so can make things worse and part of the reason for that is because we're always assuming that something's wrong with them. This creates a superior role when we think that we can fix them. And the thing to keep in mind is that while we enjoy helping and fixing other people, most of us don't really enjoy it when people try to fix us. And then likewise with women when they talk about sharing feelings, it also comes across more as an attack of the other person's character.

A true definition of a feeling is an emotion like anger or sadness. And so when someone's talking about their feelings, it sounds more like, you know, "I'm feeling sad," and, "I need a hug," or whatever. But typically when people say they're talking about their feelings it sounds more like this; "You always lie," or, "You never support me. You make me feel unappreciated." And these statements, of course, are judgments or an attack, which often set up a conversation for blame, what I call the blame game which also leads to more arguing and unresolved feelings. And in a sense, to use a metaphor, it's like being the navigator in a car and you're telling your partner what not to do, like don't go left, don't go right, don't stop here, or you're criticizing them, saying things like, you're going too fast. And as you can imagine if you were the driver in that situation, it gets pretty confusing as to what you should be doing because all you have is information about what you're doing wrong.

Scott: Well, I think that's a great analogy. Left unresolved, what are some of the long and short term negative effects that this type of thinking or this type of behavior can have on the relationship?

Kevin: That's a good question. Let me tell you a bit about what drives negative thinking. Most negative thinkers feel that they're being realistic and the research shows that realists are more often right but optimists are more often successful. So in a sense, success is sacrificed when we focus on

being realistic. In the short term, the effects can be that it affects our emotional state, which then in turn affects us physically and mentally. In the long term it can affect relationships, increasing our chances of divorce. The question is do you want to be right or do you want to be successful?

Scott: Now, as a therapist, you're sitting down and you're speaking with couples that have come in to explore, perhaps even resolve, issues in the relationship and at what point in this conversation, or does it happen beforehand, that you see couples becoming aware that it's actually negative thinking that's hurting the relationship?

Kevin: Well, someone once said that the purpose of a therapist is to lovingly wake people up and so what I'm looking for when I'm trying to find out, you know, trying to lead a couple into the positive, is I'm looking for the exceptions to their problems, what kinds of things are going well in the relationship, and trying to help them realize how much good there is to be found in the relationship, what are their strengths. Of course there are times when it is necessary to examine a problem. However, I strive to help to them uncover solutions that achieve their potential to address those issues, rather than focusing on just the problem itself. And to use an analogy, it's kind of like helping the scarecrow discover he has a brain or the lion discover he's always had courage or the tin man discovering he already has a heart.

Scott: Are there any trends related to, like are there any patterns that you see among couples or even the individuals that have an issue staying positive and thinking positive?

Kevin: Yeah, when you asked that question, the word that comes to mind is 'spiraling'. Spiraling is a pattern of repeatedly focusing on worst case scenarios that leads to greater problems. When a negative situation happens in our life we have a choice about how we respond to that. And if we respond to it in a negative way, if we have a negative outlook about what's happening to us, then this tends to increase the problem itself. It kind of enables it. I'll give you an example. When I first got married, I was worried that my wife was going to spend all our money. This comes from a story that was created in my parents' marriage where my mom was a spend-a-holic and my dad was a work-a-holic, and I was afraid that that dynamic would reoccur; and out of that fear, I started becoming very controlling. That's what we do when we're afraid, we try to control the situation. And it wasn't until one day my wife said, kind of challenged me on this, and asked me why I was acting that way and I told her I was afraid of becoming like my father and her becoming like my mom and she said something that kind of helped me wake up. And she said, "I'm not your mother." And I realized in that moment that if I continued to act like my dad, I was going to create the same problem in my marriage. And so I needed to change that, I needed to absolutely trust that she was not the same person and that I wouldn't need to take measures to fight a battle that didn't need to be fought.

You mentioned what kind of trends do we see, and one of the trends that we see is that couples tend to miss their first appointment. Because I think this is another great example of what positive thinking can do, when a couple schedules an appointment to come in for marriage counseling, they begin to develop hope and they begin to think, "This is going to help us get better," and that thought alone starts to change the way they treat each other and then of course, at some point before the appointment, they realize that they don't need to come in and they miss the first appointment. Of course, I believe that even in those scenarios they need to come in anyways because we need to identify what they were doing that made things work. But it's just an interesting observation that we experience here in therapy.

Scott: Okay, so they skip the first appointment, they finally make it in for the second. At that time, what do you suggest the couples do to fix the ratio of their positive to negative thinking?

Kevin:

Well, I had somebody mention to me once that of all the advice he's given couples, he would distill it down to one suggestion, which is always assume the best about your spouse. Of course there's an exception to every rule. The exception would be enabling bad behavior such as an alcoholic problem. In those situations, there tends to be unresolved issues from the past and I would recommend seeking professional help. So to simplify what I'm saying, if assuming the best actually makes things worse, then it's not working. But in most cases, if there isn't some deep-rooted issue, assuming the best can actually turn things around. So do it as long as it's working and if it's not working then stop. When we treat people better than they deserve or better than they're currently acting, then they tend to rise up to the love that's being offered to them. Likewise, when we treat people worse than they deserve, they tend to regress. A wonderful quote from Abraham Lincoln is, "If you look for the bad in people expecting to find it, you surely will." I believe we must ask ourselves are we pulling others down or are we lifting them up?

Scott:

What specific items can couples work on that would help them with some of those negative issues that you were kind of talking about earlier?

Kevin:

I have three things that are suggestions. One is to foster an attitude of gratitude. This is getting back to the basics, manners in marriage, which are expressions of love. Saying things like thank you, and please, you're welcome, and of course complimenting them. Sometimes when couples get married there's this sense of entitlement that they shouldn't have to be polite, they shouldn't have to say thank you. But these words actually are very powerful in creating intimacy in a relationship. It would be a lot like saying, I shouldn't have to say I love you, you should just know that. And of course that doesn't work.

The second thing is to get your hopes up. I know in our society we've been kind of taught not to get our hopes up because then we'll be let down. But without hope, we end up being stuck with the very thing we're trying to avoid, slowing down. And the thing we're trying to avoid is the downs of life. Instead we need to learn how to embrace them by adapting principles like forgiveness and acceptance and unconditional love. The third thing is absolutely take a date with your spouse weekly. 96 percent of couples that date weekly stay married. Those are incredible odds, especially with such a high divorce rate in our country, and probably the most significant thing a couple can do. It's a lot cheaper than therapy and especially cheaper than a lawyer. A date is an opportunity to fill the marital bank account with deposits. It builds trust and fondness for one another. And I do have one rule on a date that I tell people, and that is do not bring up problems on dates. Dating is a sacred space for positive interaction.

Scott:

Well when you have couples that are approaching the relationship with this attitude of gratitude and they're dating and they're speaking highly of their spouse, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interactions of that relationship?

Kevin:

Well the effects are amazing. I had a client recently tell me, he called me on the phone and said, "Being positive works." And I said, "So what do you mean by that?" And he said that his wife had not been intimate with him for over eight years and he had come in alone trying to salvage their relationship. He explained that he went home and with the thought that passion would return into their marriage, he began to be positive and grateful. And rather than being negative and depressed about the past, he simply held on to the hope that things would improve. That very evening she initiated intimacy, and the amazing part is that he didn't have to say a word to her. All he did was show her his hope through his expressions and she sensed a change simply in his nonverbal communication and his attitude of gratitude and this made him more attractive to her.

Wayne Dyer said once, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

Scott: Such a fascinating topic. Kevin, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know?

Kevin: Well of course I think it's important to remember that the research shows that optimists are more often successful. And in fact, there's a lot of research that shows a lot of benefits to being positive. For example, people who are optimists tend to live longer, are healthier. One study showed that they live on average 40 years longer than people who are negative. They tend to have more money, are more generous, more social, and they have less cancer by 25 percent, also less heart attacks by 50 percent, tend to be more trusting and forgiving, and more able to give and receive love. They also tend to need less medication and are less tempted to drink, smoke, and develop other addictive behaviors. And of course the most important is that there's less divorce.

Scott: Yeah, I really like that quote about the optimist versus the pessimist. Kevin, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Kevin: You're welcome. Thank you for the opportunity.

Scott: To find out more about Kevin Rutter and his practice, Growing Tree Counseling Center, PLLC, you can visit their website at www.grow-nc.com or call (828) 638-5907. 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.

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