

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Holiday Stress

This is Episode number 38 of Stay Happily Married, "Holiday Stress."

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

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I have on the telephone Dr. Kim Kimberling. Dr. Kimberling has been a professional counselor for over 20 years. He's the president and co-founder of Family Christian Counseling in Oklahoma City. Dr. Kimberling has been married to his wife Nancy for 35 years. Wow. These are the guys we need to be talking to. And they have two grown children.

Welcome to the show, Kim.

Kim Kimberling: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you're here and talking to us from Oklahoma Center. Sort of the center of the country out there. I think you guys have sort of really been the focus of a lot of the nation since the bombing. So it's been quite some time now since it happened, hasn't it?

Kim Kimberling: It has. That was in '95 and in some ways it seems a long time ago; in some ways like, yes, it just happened.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I spent a year in college out in Oklahoma so I have a little bit of a feel for the area. Beautiful part of the country. And I'm really glad you could come. Today we want to talk about holiday stress. And I don't know about you, but I feel like I've been dealing with holiday stress since maybe July. When my wife's -- it's really just my wife's family that causes trouble, not mine.

Kim Kimberling: Always.

Lee Rosen: When they start arranging for Thanksgiving and they do it months out, it's like the tension level just rises. And so I want to get your advice on that and hear what you have to say about it. Now, I know you do one of these premarital courses, something called Preparing for Marriage. You've been doing that a long time?

Kim Kimberling: We have. We started that course about -- gosh, it's been about 11 years ago. And I teach at a number of different times through the year. Started in one church and now we're doing it in a number of different churches.

Lee Rosen: Well, the thing I heard about your program, and this amazes me, is that you've tracked the number of divorces of people that have been through your program and it's like ridiculously small, isn't it?

Kim Kimberling: Well, we're actually doing another survey right now, but so far we've stayed under 10 percent, which is amazing. And I think there's probably a number of reasons. I think, one, people that come for the most part have some type of commitment that they want to try to do marriage right. It's interesting when couples walk in the door that first time and not always both of them are excited to be there but usually by the end of the course they really feel like they've got something. And we get great feedback that we try to give them some real practical tools and apparently a lot of those couples have made that work.

The other thing that I think has kept our divorce statistic low is that we have about 12 percent of the couples that take the class that choose not to marry. And so they're making that decision on this side of the altar instead of the other side so it's not a divorce. And as hard as it is for some of those couples at that time, it makes a huge difference.

Lee Rosen: I want to go ahead and give people the Web site for that program so that they can look at it while they're listening to us.

Kim Kimberling: Sure.

Lee Rosen: It's PrepForMarriage.com. And I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

When you talk about 10 percent, that just blows my mind. I read a stat not very long ago that said that 21 percent of couples, at least one party will consult a divorce lawyer in the first year of their

marriage, and 17 percent of them won't make it through the first year. And here you are years down the road with just 10 percent. You guys are doing amazing work. That's phenomenal.

Kim Kimberling: Well, I wish I had some magic key to give people on that. And, I don't know, I think we really push for commitment and really stress that a lot, and then really try to equip them so that they can work through those difficult times; and try to really help couples see that no matter what comes up, if they'll stay together they can work through -- most things you can work through.

Lee Rosen: Well, I agree. And you see people that get divorced and then they go and get married again and it's really not any better the second time if you haven't made those changes you need to make.

Kim Kimberling: Absolutely. And our divorce rates for second marriages are much higher than first marriages. And what you earlier Lee, yeah, I think the stats that I'm seeing now there are more divorces in the first year of marriage now than there ever have been, so to me that really just layers the lack of commitment there.

Lee Rosen: Right. People just are not ready to do what they're doing.

Kim Kimberling: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Well, let's talk about this whole holiday thing because I really -- all kidding aside, for me in my marriage this is one of the most stressful things that goes on. And in my house what it's all about I think is allocating time for us in a way. Other people may have different issues, but is that a fairly common situation? We've got to decide which time, which days do we spend with which people, and how do we break this up? What do you see?

Kim Kimberling: I think that's a huge issue for a lot of families, especially if -- some of the families I think have the most difficult time is if their family of origin -- maybe their parents are divorced and have remarried and all of a sudden the couple is, "We've got four places we're supposed to be." And that just can drive them crazy in trying to make everybody happy. And the reality is you can't make everybody happy. So the couple has got to make some decisions and choices.

Lee Rosen: Well, and when you have kids and you have to make these decisions, at some point it sort of begins to feel also like not only do you have to address all these other family members outside of your nuclear family, but you've got to have -- you've got to build your own traditions just for you and your spouse and your kids too. I mean, you've got to fit that in somehow.

Kim Kimberling: Absolutely. And that is so important. I tell couples that whether they're just newlyweds, first marriage, whether it's a second marriage and they've got a blended family. Take the traditions that you want to bring forward but then start establishing things for yourself that you can pass down and then become unique and meaningful to your family. And that is such an important thing.

Lee Rosen: Well, you would sort of think that in-laws and your parents had to do that for their children -- you -- and that they would understand that. But don't you feel like there's a lot of pressure to stick with the old family traditions and not start the new ones coming from the in-laws, or even from your own parents?

Kim Kimberling: Oh, I think so. I think change is hard for most of us and for some reason we hold some of those holiday traditions almost like they're sacred. And what I really try to tell couples, I say really the most important thing is you figuring out how you're going to spend time with the people you love and that are important to you. And whether you celebrate Christmas on Christmas Day or Christmas Even or the week before or the week after, it really doesn't matter. If you can get past that and really just focus on, hey, we want to be together and we want to celebrate together. But that's hard.

Lee Rosen: Oh, it is hard. Yeah. It's a real challenge. Do you see loyalty coming into play where, for instance, your wife's mother is, "Oh, you really need to come be with your dad and with us," and the competition maybe between the husband and the wife's parents? Do you see that happen a lot?

Kim Kimberling: Yeah. And I think some parents have perfected the way to imply or to guilt to their kids really well. And so that can make it all that much harder. There's always a reason they can throw out there.

I had an interesting thing with a couple a few years ago. This is their first Christmas -- and we had talked in the class. One of the things we talk about is things that you're going to have to make decisions on, and this is something that usually comes up for probably 90 percent of the couples; what do you do at the holidays? And they had come up with a great plan. They were going to alternate Thanksgiving and Christmas. Both parents live out of town. They lived in Oklahoma City and one year they were going to spend Christmas with one family and Thanksgiving with the other and flip it every other. That was a great plan.

Well, when they presented this plan, nobody went for it. Everybody said, "No, you're not going to change our traditions. You're not going to do this."

And finally the couple said, "You know what? This year we're going to Kansas City for Christmas," and they did. They went by themselves to Kansas City, had a great time, and then when the deal of the next holiday season came up, both families were very willing to compromise. So they took the strong stand early and it was hard. It was hard. But it made a difference long term.

Lee Rosen: Long term. That's right. Well, I will tell you there's a beautiful island off the coast of Venezuela called Bonaire and we have spent many Christmas's there for that very reason.

Kim Kimberling: Sounds like a good choice.

Lee Rosen: The line that I have heard -- for a decade I think I heard this line every Christmas from my wife's -- via my wife. She was hearing it from her family. "Well, you know this could be your grandfather's last Christmas."

Kim Kimberling: Oh, yeah. And, boy, that's a horrible thing to put onto somebody. And I'm sure that's -- because I hear that type of thing often and it just -- that's a hard one to fight.

Lee Rosen: Right. Oh, it's all so complicated.

Kim Kimberling: That's below the belt.

Lee Rosen: That's right. Don't these people know how to fight fair?

Kim Kimberling: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: What about money? I mean, today everybody I know has family that lives on the other side of the country. My brother has got relatives that are spread out; in-laws in one place, our parents in another. Doesn't money come into -- how do you pay for all this? Do people have difficulty? Do they stress out about how they're going to manage the finances of all of this?

Kim Kimberling: I think so. And I think this year, even though a lot of families are probably doing fine, I think that because of the state of economy they're just more conscious of how do we handle our money and how to be responsible. And I tell couples make a budget for the holidays. Include your travel, your gifts, and don't go into debt.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Kim Kimberling: And so that might mean you have to maybe not make that trip this year. And maybe you -- last year I had a family in Chicago that had always flown and last year the husband had just gone through a job change and they made the drive. And they tried to make it a fun thing and I think it worked out fine for them. But they saved a lot of money by driving instead of flying.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, if you're already stressed about how to deal with the relatives and with the personalities of all the folks involved, and then you throw the money onto it, that just sounds like a recipe for disaster for a lot of couples.

Kim Kimberling: Well, and then you start fighting each other. And that's what I tell couples. You cannot let the holidays or family or the money pull you guys apart. You've got to make your decisions together and then you've got to stand together no matter what that decision is.

Lee Rosen: Well, you mentioned debt. What about gifts? In my family, my wife's siblings have all gone out and had, I think, 400 or 500 children each and we only had two. But realistically, when you're talking about buying gifts for all these people, how are people addressing that?

Kim Kimberling: I think there's a number of different ways. And again, it's kind of breaking that tradition where everybody gets a gift. The idea of drawing names, you hear that a lot and I think that works out well. You buy one nice gift for somebody that you draw their name and then you don't buy something for anybody else.

I have a family I talked to yesterday and they have decided that they're just going to buy for the kids in the family. So everybody that's, like, 18 and under gets a gift and the older people don't this year.

I had one family -- this is kind of interesting -- they did the dirty Santa thing, where everybody bought a nice gift, they brought it, and they did the deal where you go around, somebody picks a gift and then someone with the next number has the option to open a new gift or steal that one. And they had a lot of fun with that. Now, some families that wouldn't work very well. They'd probably get into chaos with that type of thing. But there's some good options there.

Lee Rosen: Fistfight next to the Christmas tree. Right.

Kim Kimberling: Exactly. One couple came up with a great idea I thought too. They gave coupons. Like to the grandmother that lived alone they gave her a coupon that was good to come over for dinner one night a month during the next year. And for the sister and brother-in-law that had three kids, they gave them a coupon good for a free night of babysitting once a month for the next year. So that was real creative, didn't cost them anything, and it was something that the people they gave them to experienced that gift all year long.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's a terrific idea. Do you talk about in your course, in the Prep For Marriage course, do you talk about these issues before people get married? Is something you try to address so that they don't get caught up in it?

Kim Kimberling: We do. That is one of the things that I just feel like seems to come up for most -- especially young, newlywed couples. And so we address that and we kind of use that in conjunction with one of the problem-solving techniques that we teach them. And usually that's the example we want them to use, to go ahead and think through that so they can get on the same page and then go present that to the rest of the family.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'll tell you, it is so complicated. And when we talk about it in the abstract you sort of think about this being an issue between you and your in-laws and your parents. But then you start throwing in all the siblings that are married and then these other players that might have significant relationships with your family or part of a tradition. Golly, it is just -- you need some kind of a spreadsheet to map it all out and figure it out.

Does it ever sort itself out? Do you find that couples that have been married 10, 15, 20 years, that they've kind of figured it out and now it's no longer a discussion they have to have every year?

Kim Kimberling: You know, I think we can get to that point. But then the reality is our lives continue to change. So at some point they may be facing the empty nest or their children getting married, and so it's kind of something that goes on generation after generation or even year to year. You mentioned family moving. That happens a lot. Somebody that's here, been here every year, this year all of a sudden maybe they move halfway across the country, so you've got to deal with that. Maybe there is a divorce or a death. So we're always faced with making some of those changes when we celebrate our holidays.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good news there, that it basically never settles down. Wonderful. Thanks for that uplifting message.

Kim Kimberling: This was kind of an interesting thing. We had a couple that got married and they're both second marriage and they were about mid-60s when they got married. They both had grown kids, all this kind of stuff. And what they said, they told all their kids -- and all the kids lived probably within 100 miles of Oklahoma City. There was one in Dallas, so that was a little farther.

But they said, "We're going to be home all day Christmas Eve and all day Christmas Day. We're going to have food out. Your presents will be here. You come when it's convenient for you. We'll be here." And they loved it. They said, "We just stayed home for two days and had a great time together."

And they said when the kids came and the grandkids came, nobody ever came at the same time and they said, "We had one-on-one time with them that we wouldn't have had otherwise." So it worked out good for everybody.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I guess there are a million good solutions but there so much pressure to do it the way it's always been done.

Kim Kimberling: Exactly. It's just taking that and breaking it that first year. And most of the time if you can break it that first year, realize, hey, we don't have to keep doing it like we always did it.

Lee Rosen: Right. And that just sounds like wonderful advice, but I also -- I've seen it in my own life. When you try to break the tradition, you just never know where the resistance is going to come from. And each year I think those people that are resisting will keep pulling back to maintain whatever they believe is the right way to do it.

Kim Kimberling: Right. I think you're right.

Lee Rosen: How do you not let that divide your relationship with your spouse? It's tough because all those family members really do exert a lot of pressure.

Kim Kimberling: They do. And family members kind of learn the buttons to punch on us that work, and so they keep punching those buttons. I think it goes back to the couple really has to make sure that they're on the same page together. And then they have to just make that commitment, "We're not going to let this pull us apart, no matter who it is." And that's going to be tough. In some situations I'm sure it's extremely tough because there can be a lot of pressure from people that you love and that love you, and that makes it difficult. It's not like these are strangers tell you something that they want you to do different.

Lee Rosen: Right. The nice thing about it too, I guess -- at least for me -- is that I can see it coming now. I've been married almost 20 years and so I can see the cycle, the annual rhythm of when it's coming and we can discuss it before it arrives, which I think is a lot easier than one of these unexpected crises that you have to deal with in your marriage. So that's a good thing.

Kim Kimberling: I think so too. And we're getting pretty close now to the holidays. The earlier couples can do that -- I tell young couples, "If you go over this with your family in the summer, there's not going to be as much attached to it as if you wait until November to do it."

Lee Rosen: Right.

Kim Kimberling: And sometimes it's easier to get them to -- the family may regret that commitment they made to you at that time, but if you've talked about it and made that commitment then, it's much easier to follow through with it.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you're the expert. You teach people how to do the marriage thing. You've talked to people about holidays. You really are the guru of managing holidays and not having it disrupt your marriage. What goes on in the Kimberling family? How was it and how is it? How have you figured it out?

Kim Kimberling: How have we done that? Well, when Nancy and I got married, her family's in Houston and my family's here. When I got out of school, my dad is in retail and so we started out living in Oklahoma City, retail; and retail at Christmas kept us from leaving. So what we would do -- because of that, I think that helped us. And both of our families put no pressure on us, and that helped a lot.

So we would spend Christmas with my family and usually Christmas evening or the next day we would head to Houston and we would then go down there and spend a week and spend time with her family.

With my family here, we've handled things pretty well. We've had a few things we've had to work out. We've tried to talk about things early, but you can't always anticipate everything. We now have both of our kids are married and so we've had to deal with that.

And what we've done -- and I tell people not to hold onto things, but there's things that are important to me. And so to tell my kids that, "You guys do what's best for you and we'll fit in around you," it was hard to get those words out at times. But so far it has worked out

well and we've been blessed with other in-laws that have -- nobody's put their foot down and said, "You've got to do this." And so we've been able to work that out.

So we've been blessed in some ways, not had anybody that's really put up a fight. But we tried to open that door to start with, saying, "You guys talk to the other side and then we'll adjust to what we need to do."

Lee Rosen: Well, it sounds like on the one hand maybe you've been blessed with cooperative people. On the other hand, maybe it's all the result of good planning and that's the way it looks when it's working the way it should work.

Kim Kimberling: The planning makes a huge difference.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, I think you have really given us some practical advice that is awfully helpful. Anything else you want to throw out there? Anything else you can do to help us as we head into this chaos?

Kim Kimberling: Well, I think the main thing that I would reiterate is just don't let this be something that hurts your marriage. If you feel like "this is starting to erode our marriage," then back up and say, "Wait a minute; we've got to do something different." The marriage has got to survive Christmas.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's right. Absolutely. We've got to survive Christmas. That sounds funny but it is so true.

Kim Kimberling: But it's true.

Lee Rosen: Well, Kim, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I really appreciate it. I think you've given us some great advice. Thank you.

Kim Kimberling: Thank you, Lee. It's been fun to do this.

Lee Rosen: Let me remind you about the Web site. Kim has this website on his Prep For Marriage classes. Take a look at that at PrepForMarriage.com. And of course there's a link, as usual, in the show notes.

And he has a very popular book called *Preparing for the Marriage of Lifetime*. And he has his latest book, *Living the Marriage of a Lifetime*. And if you go to the website you'll find information about all of this material and you can check out his blog, lots of great

information. I really encourage you to go visit the site at PrepForMarriage.com.

And thank you for listening in today. I hope that you've learned something that will help you out in your marriage. I think I've learned some things that are going to get me and my wife through the holidays that will make it easier, I hope. The marriage must survive Christmas. That's my motto now.

If you have comments about this show or any of our shows, give us a call. We have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. We would love to hear from you. Feel free to e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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 e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.