

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

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.



Managing the Monkey Mind

This is Episode number 49 of Stay Happily Married, "Managing the Monkey Mind."

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. Do you ever find yourself -- you're driving along in your car thinking about one thing, maybe what's going on at work or what you're going to cook for dinner, talking on the cell phone at the same time about something totally different. So you've got your cell phone in your right hand; you've got your steering wheel in your left hand; you've got a passenger, maybe a co-worker or a kid or whatever; and you're sort of pointing at something. Bottom line is, your mind is nowhere. It's everywhere and nowhere at the same time. If that's ever happened to you -- and I know it has because it's happened to all of us -- then managing the monkey mind is exactly what you need to know about.

I'm here by phone with Dr. Susan Wasik. She has a Ph.D. She is a nationally certified professional counselor and educator. She practices with Carolina Care and Counseling in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's also the co-founder of SOMA Consulting. I think you are really going to get a lot out of what Susan has to say.

Welcome to the show, Susan.

Susan Wasik:

Thank you so much for having me, Lee.

Lee Rosen:

Well, I am so glad you could be here today. I'm curious about your practice. Now, I mentioned that you practice with Carolina Care and Counseling. Tell me about that practice. What do you do there?

Susan Wasik: Well, as a professional counselor I have the opportunity to work with folks who are experiencing normal life transitions that can be from anything from going through a separation or divorce, going through a job change, having a change in status of life in terms of children going off to college, or just trying to figure out how to get over a particular hurdle in life. I see all kinds of folks having all kinds of issues that are typical in a lifespan.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And then you're the co-founder of SOMA Consulting. What is that all about?

Susan Wasik: SOMA Consulting is a company where we go out into different corporations and companies. We do workshops, team building; we basically take psycho-social education out of the counselor office, out of the university. I spent several years as a university professor and really enjoyed the teaching component of things related to human development and psychology. And we bring it out into the public arena where people can actually use some of this information in their everyday life.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Well, that makes a lot of sense. So you really do lead two very sort of different professional lives. That gives you a broad range of experiences, I suspect.

Susan Wasik: Right. Counseling and going to see a therapist is really a scary proposition for a lot of people. Often times my clients are first time clients and it takes a lot of courage to pick up the phone and to come and speak to someone about their persona life issues. However, I find that people are constantly fascinated by issues around human development and psychology; and when you speak about it in a public forum, in a business setting, or in a classroom, they're very, very interested.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Now, we've got to get into this whole -- the title of this episode, "Managing the Monkey Mind," which does raise questions like, what the heck are we talking about when we talk about the "monkey mind"? What's that all about?

Susan Wasik: Well, it is actually an ancient concept. I wish I could have said I made it up, but I didn't. Ancient Zen and Hindu philosophy suggests that the human mind is like a room full of monkeys bouncing from thought to thought. So each thought we might have in our busy day is a monkey. And often times I've seen and personally experienced lots of monkeys in my mind on a daily basis. And we are basically dealing with how to quiet those monkeys, how

to recognize the monkeys, and how to tame them in a way where we can live a more present and more authentic life.

Lee Rosen: And if your monkeys are out of control does that impact your marriage?

Susan Wasik: Yes, it does. It impacts everything and all of your relationships, in fact. How many times have you seen folks who are so busy -- just busy with life and trying to get from point A to point B, trying to get to work on time, trying to get the kids in the car, trying to tell your spouse what the plan for the day is? And really, we're so busy we don't attend to the present moment and we find ourselves maybe being snappish to one another, not fully aware of what perhaps your husband or wife is trying to say or a child is trying to express. And it definitely gets in the way when we're so busy living in our heads that we miss the present moment.

Lee Rosen: Right. I mean, modern life does push I think very solidly in that direction of sort of missing out on the present moment, unfortunately.

Susan Wasik: And unfortunately really what it is, is it's our cultural norm now to be so busy and always in motion -- in constant motion.

Lee Rosen: Yeah, it is. We talk about that a lot, I think, and the idea is just sort of overwhelming. So you're seeing -- I go back to this term "monkey mind." Basically you see -- when you look around and you talk to your patients, you are just seeing a lot of people with a lot of monkeys that just are not settling down.

Susan Wasik: Right. And especially when you don't pay attention they seem to multiply. Monkey mind is an equal opportunity offender, is what I say. It doesn't matter how educated you are. It doesn't matter how wealthy you are. It doesn't matter what religion, what creed. It's an equal opportunity offender. If you are busy, if you are not paying attention, and if you just constantly multitasking to the point of you think you're being productive but really you're not, you're just busy.

And one of the things we try to teach and try to demonstrate is how you can actually be less busy and more productive. And that can translate into a marriage or a relationship as well.

Lee Rosen: Okay. How? What do you mean?

Susan Wasik: Okay. A typical example would be as you're driving down the street you might be in a car with the radio on with the hand on one wheel, a cell phone in the other. You're having a conversation about things

that -- whatever's up on the conversation -- and you're also thinking in the back of your mind, "Oh, what am I going to make for dinner?" Or, "Oh, I should have said this at work today." And you're maybe reliving something that happened 10 minutes ago or 10 years ago and worrying about things that will happen an hour from now. And in the meantime you're not really driving -- safely, at least. And that's just a for instance.

And so imagine if we just turned off the radio. Made an intentional choice to turn off the radio and perhaps hold off on that phone call until we can be on that phone call if you want to talk while you're driving. I'm not saying you should, but some people do. Just kind of making intentional choices not to try to do 10 things at once, for example.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so the -- you know, it's funny because when you were saying that I was laughing because I wouldn't actually have one hand on the wheel. I'd be driving with my knee and have a sandwich in that other -- you know.

Susan Wasik: And I'm not even going to go into the texting realm either.

Lee Rosen: Oh, yeah. No. I would never text while -- surely.

Susan Wasik: But you will drive with your knees.

Lee Rosen: Right. Drive with the knees. And maybe a little texting, yeah. Okay. So you're advocating getting away from all of this chaos, this level of multitasking, and focusing on something rather than nothing I guess is what you're really saying.

Susan Wasik: That's a good example. Yeah. I would say that. You know, it's almost like we have a society of not attention deficit but too much attention on too many things at once. And it can short circuit ourselves. I see a lot of people who just feel so exhausted by the end of the day and truly they've been sitting behind a desk, for example. They're not out working the fields or doing manual labor that's physical exhausting, yet they are physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted. And a lot of my clients feel like they haven't accomplished anything at the end of the day -- anything meaningful, at least.

So what I try to do when I see my clients in person in my private practice, I try to encourage them to be more intentional in their choices and how they spend their time. There are so many networking opportunities out there now with social networking, with FaceBook and e-mail, instant information at our fingertips.

What would happen if we just stopped for a moment? And I'm not saying we need to become monks and go into a deep meditation, but how about if we just stop for a moment and you breathe in and out and you notice that you're breathing in and out and just gather your thoughts before we take on another five or six things? It's about being intentional with your time, your space and your life, really.

Lee Rosen: What happens to people -- where do we end up if we don't do that? Where do you see us -- in your practice I'm sure you're seeing fallout of the monkey mind. What's happening to people when they're just not being intentional? They're not paying attention? They're not aware of what's really going on?

Susan Wasik: Well, I call that -- it's unofficial, but my diagnosis is chronic monkey minditis. It's a funny joke, but when I say it it's amazing how many people actually get it. They nod their head and they're like, "Oh, I think I know what you mean."

But to give you an example of what a chronic monkey mind might look like is if you were just now thinking about something else that you have absolutely no control over at this present moment as we were just talking. Or if you chronically misplace or forget important items. Like if you're constantly forgetting where your cell phone is, where your keys are, documents. You might have chronic monkey mind if you think multitasking is some kind of badge of honor. It's just a very cultural thing I've noticed, especially in the past 10, 15 years, that we must be doing more than one thing at once because we can. It doesn't mean we should.

Lee Rosen: You know, just listening to you and tying it back into marriage, I get a lot of feedback at home from my spouse and my kids about not listening. I mean, my wife will say, "Put the computer down and listen to me," that kind of thing. And so it sounds like that's not just me; I'm not the only one who's not listening.

Susan Wasik: No, you're not the only one. Don't feel badly. You're not the only one.

Lee Rosen: I'll play this for her.

Susan Wasik: But in the event that -- when it comes to couples, yes, you do have access to your work life 24/7 when you bring your laptop home or you're checking your e-mails. "Let's just check one more e-mail before I go to bed tonight." Well, that's a mistake. Usually that's a mistake because it will take away the time you have set aside at home with your loved ones. Yes, you get a quick hit, a quick fix; but,

almost like an addiction, you'll find that it will not nurture your primary relationship nine times out of 10.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. I buy all of that. And I buy that the monkey mind out of control is a big problem. And I'm on FaceBook. I'm driving with the knees. I'm doing all those things you mentioned. I'm on Twitter; I can text to Twitter from my cell phone while zipping down the highway. And I totally agree with you that -- it makes sense to me that we're missing out, that we're hurting relationships, that we're missing out on life by engaging -- being busy but not being productive, just what you said. I mean, I buy that.

But simply being aware of that, knowing, "Gosh, we really ought to focus on one thing at a time and do less," doesn't really seem -- for me, anyway -- to stop my desire to go check that last e-mail. So how do you turn that around? I guess that's where you're really helping people.

Susan Wasik: I think that -- well, first of all, awareness is the first hurdle. You can't fix a problem until you admit you have one or if your spouse repeatedly reminds you that you have one.

Lee Rosen: "I'm addicted to Twitter," right.

Susan Wasik: But I encourage couples and families and individuals -- I think it's very fun to catch up on FaceBook and to look at all these little meaningless trivia points of your life that will add to the monkeys in your mind, truly, and kind of make an intentional choice, "Okay, instead of doing that right now, I am going to look into the eyes of my child, notice how old they are at this moment, and I want to hear a story from them about anything. What did they find interesting today? And I'm going to really be present with them." It is an intentional choice to slow down, even if it's for five or 10 minutes. And I'll tell you, it's hard because it's so -- the computer beckons and you have all these things pulling at you. But to actually sit and be with someone is truly a lost art.

Lee Rosen: So are you doing that in your practice? Are you giving people homework and having them come back and talk to you about how they did and that sort of thing?

Susan Wasik: Sure am. I sure am. And you know, the kind of counseling that I do in private practice, there are all types of therapy out there and I'm a big cheerleader for therapy, especially for people who are willing and ready to make changes in their lives. My particular brand of therapy is generally brief in nature and usually my typical clients

last about six, eight, maybe 10 weeks in terms of -- according to what their goals are and what their issues are.

So they don't have to go through years of psychotherapy, the kind that you might imagine from the movies where you're laying down on the couch and you're talking about dreams that last for about five or six years. There is a place for that but the kind that I do is, like I said, more brief in nature and more targeted toward what behavior you would like to change or what change you would like to see in your life.

Lee Rosen: Can we use your approach while eating and checking FaceBook or no?

Susan Wasik: Well, that's another thing I say. You know, people who have chronic monkey minditis often don't taste their food anyway. They eat it and they wonder why they either so full because they ate more than they intended to, or they didn't even notice they just ate because food loses its taste because we're not paying attention. And so that's another thing I talk about. Chronic monkey minditis you often do not taste food and it's because we're busy. Very, very busy.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very busy. We're all busy. "How are you doing?" "I'm busy, busy, busy." Right. I know. I hear that everywhere I turn.

So when you have couples come in and you realize the monkey mind is the problem, is it typically a problem for both spouses or is it really more one complaining about the other one having a problem with the monkeys in their mind?

Susan Wasik: Well, it depends, really, on a case-to-case basis. But I find that just by virtue of living in this country at this time, 9 times out of 10 it's both. And the monkeys might look different. Say if it's a couple and there's a stay-at-home mom and the husband works in a corporate type of job, the mom's monkeys might be related to children, things that their schedules require, appointments that she has to make to keep the household running; whereas perhaps the husband might be different, work-related. You're getting calls all times of the day, way past dinner time, to address issues at work that'll be taken care of the next day. So their monkeys might look different but they're still monkeys. Does that make sense?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. Everybody's life is a little different so the input is different, but the effect is very much the same.

Susan Wasik: And then of course in this economy you see an increase of dual income earnings, where they have an increasing amount of monkeys at work and at home and it's hard to separate those.

Lee Rosen: Right. Absolutely. So is there sort of a big picture? Are there steps that you walk people through as they're trying to manage their monkey mind?

Susan Wasik: Well, part of our program that we do when we do consulting out in the public, people say, "Okay, I got the problem. I definitely got it. Now what?" There is no quick fix in a society that loves quick fixes. But we do have some general steps that if you had to summarize some things that you can do easily and efficiently and frequently, some ideas are, for example, tuning in.

Do you remember back in the day when we had a tune-in radio station and you knew that you were close to a radio station but it was still a little fuzzy and you kind of heard a little bit of the music but not really?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Susan Wasik: That's how I think a lot of people are going through their lives these days. We're kind of in between stations and we hear a lot of static, we hear some parts of words, but we don't really hear the music. What I encourage people to do is actually tune into the radio station of your choice in your mind. What exactly do you want to consider thinking about at this moment, rather than trying to think of three things at once? And quiet your mind and say, "Okay. This is the next thing on my plate and I'm going to think about this for a moment." And just tune in. That's a simple analogy.

Another thing that we say is get the monkeys off your back. You should acknowledge that when you have -- when I say, "Oh, you look like you're about to short circuit," it's because people are just overwhelmed with stuff to do and things on their mind. So I say, okay. A lot of times in session I might say, "Give me a running list of your monkeys right now. Tell me what's on your back." And just by stating what some of those monkeys are -- like I said, they're different for everybody -- by speaking those monkeys out loud, somehow that makes it more manageable. You name them. You count them. And somehow that makes it a little bit better and you can see for yourself if it's really worth being worked up about.

Another thing is feed your monkeys. Don't let them consume you. Don't let these thoughts consume you. Talk about them with someone. And if it's really something that keeps coming up again

and again, deal with the issue. Deal with it. I hear a lot of people say, "I've got to work out. I don't have time to work out. I don't have time to take care of myself." That is a monkey I hear, especially with the new year, come up a lot. So I assign them a task: tackle that monkey. Do some research while you're on the computer and look for a gym or a class nearby that might be able to fit into your life. I give them a thing to do about a particular monkey that seems to be coming back.

Lee Rosen: Makes sense.

Susan Wasik: So things like that. And they're always going to be there. I think that you have to at least honor the fact that we live in a very busy society. Our culture is one of work and keep accumulating things and keep moving. We're a very productive society on many levels and I think you have to honor that's where we are right now. And also, you don't have to go to a temple in some kind of Himalayan mountain to meditate or to calm the mind; you can do it right in your own shoes, right where you sit, at any moment you choose.

Lee Rosen: Just making some changes. I mean, it makes a lot of sense. I think it sounds -- in a way it does sound like a quick fix but obviously it takes a lot of time, energy, and effort to change the direction of your thinking. So it's not going to be a quick fix but it sure is easy to understand where we're going.

Susan Wasik: Yeah. It is simple but you just have to keep experiencing it over and over again. It is simple. It might not be easy but some of the solutions might be simple and within our reach.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, listen, I appreciate you taking the time to walk us through this. You know, I had no idea when we got started what the heck the monkey mind was and I really appreciate you filling us in and giving us some ideas about how to manage it and to really make our lives better. And I think if we get our lives on track than our marriages just follow right along and they'll work a lot better too. So thank you so much.

Susan Wasik: It was my pleasure. Thank you, Lee. It was a lot of fun.

Lee Rosen: Well, that really was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that and it's an interesting topic. You can find out more about Susan at the Carolina Care and Counseling website. The website is CarolinaCareInc.com. I will put a link to CarolinaCareInc.com in our show notes at Stay Happily Married. You can also call her office at (919) 676-1497.

There's a lot of great information at the SOMA Consulting website as well and they offer small group workshops, organizational consulting, retreats. The website for SOMA Consulting is ManagingTheMonkeyMind.com. And of course I'll put a link for that as well.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. If you have comments about this show or any of our shows we really enjoy hearing from you and it helps us to figure out which direction to go and who our guests ought to be as we move forward. We have a comment line set up for you to call in at (919) 256-3083. We also welcome your comments by e-mail; comments@stayhappilymarried.com is the address. We'd love to hear from you.

Until next time, stay happily married.

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