

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.



## I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

*This is Episode number 53 of Stay Happily Married, "I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!"*

*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](http://Rosen.com).*

---

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here by telephone with Dr. Kristen Wynns, a licensed psychologist practicing in Durham, North Carolina.

Dr. Wynns holds a master's degree and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has been in private practice for about five years. She opened her current office about a year and a half ago and specializes in counseling for children and adolescents. She also does marital therapy and she does parent coaching. She's also been married for 10 years and has two young girls of her own.

Welcome to the show, Kristen.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you could be here today. I want to jump right into this topic of "I'm Sorry." It seems like such an easy thing to say in a marriage. Something goes wrong, things are inevitably going to go wrong, and we would just apologize. We would say, "I'm sorry," and we would be forgiven and life would sort of move along. But I get the impression that maybe it's not as easy as I'd like it to be, huh?

Kristen Wynns: That's right. You know, I actually see this from working with couples at my practice and being in a 10-year marriage that this seems to be very difficult for us, in particular apologizing to our

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

spouses. That seems to be one of the more difficult things to do in a marriage.

Lee Rosen: Well, do you think -- I heard someone say -- it's probably a famous quote and I'm like, I heard somebody say -- but I heard somebody say that a lot of us would rather be right than be happy. Do you think that's -- is that true? I mean, is that where we're coming from? It's like, "I'm not apologizing. I was right."

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. That is one of the key issues and it's because -- it's all wrapped up in our pride and our self-esteem. And when we admit that we're wrong, that's admitting that our partner's right. And a lot of times that really dings our self-esteem because a lot of us are perfectionists or semi-perfectionists where we like to think that we handle things well and we know what we're doing. So when we admit that we're wrong, even if it is to our spouse, that really is painful almost to admit that and to say those two little words.

Lee Rosen: Is it something that you see a lot of? Do you meet with a lot of people that really do have trouble saying "I'm sorry"?

Kristen Wynns: I think that's wrapped up with a lot of other common relationship problems. But clearly that's right in the mix because a lot of times it's like the snowball effect where if people are going throughout their day and weeks hurting their partner's feelings and they're not apologizing for it, over time obviously they start to feel more distant from each other, resentments build up where you're getting irritated at the little things, because that's our emotional connection to our partner. And if we feel like they don't care enough about us or the relationship to acknowledge our hurt feelings and apologize, it just leads to all kinds of other relationship issues.

Lee Rosen: Well, is it more men that have trouble saying "I'm sorry," or is it more women, or is it about the same for all of us?

Kristen Wynns: That's a good question. And although of course we all know there are individual differences, we do know that this culture that we live in often times women are raised to apologize quickly because it's taught this is courtesy, this is good manners; and a lot of times men are raised with the belief that admitting wrong doing makes them seem weak. So they're not necessarily coming into marriages with a mentality that it's good to just admit when you're wrong, say you're sorry, so you do see that phenomenon a lot where it's more difficult sometimes for men to apologize.

And I was actually reading an article recently that gave several examples where men went their entire marriages and they could not

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

force themselves to say those words, "I'm sorry." They would do other things like wash the wife's car or bring home flowers. It was a real issue for them that they could not say, "I'm sorry." And obviously that's a problem.

Lee Rosen: Well, it's so weird to me because -- I know I'm not unusual. I mean, we go through life -- everywhere we go we are saying "I'm sorry" all -- you know, you bump into somebody, you park in their space, or just whatever it may be, you're constantly having to say "I'm sorry" to people out in your life in your day. What is the deal with why is it so much harder when it's your spouse?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Yeah. And that's definitely a phenomenon. I think everybody experiences that it's so much easier with friends or co-workers than the person whom you love the most and who you're definitely going to spend the rest of your life with. And I think it's because you have such a long history with your partner and there's this idea that if you apologize this time, who knows how many times that's going to be held against you? "Well, remember when you did this and this?" So I think there's that fear that it's going to be held against you.

And there's that long history where in your mind you're thinking, "Well, yes, I did this. But she did this and this and this and this so I shouldn't have to apologize for this." And there's just -- it's so much more complex in our marriages because we've got this long history with this person.

Lee Rosen: If you see a marriage where both spouses can say "I'm sorry" is that usually a pretty good sign that they're on the right track?

Kristen Wynns: That's great. I mean, I think that's one of the holy grails of marriage.

Lee Rosen: Is it? Yeah?

Kristen Wynns: If you can get to that point -- and honestly, it just takes a mental shift to just tell yourself, "I care more about my partner and this relationship than being right."

I actually was reading about a couple who had been married for 80 years. I think it was actually the Guinness World Book record for marriage. And they were asking them, "What's the key to this marriage lasting so long?" And they did talk about brandy and sherry but I'm not sure if that might be another issue that they like to have their evening drink, but in addition to that --

Lee Rosen: Eighty years; as long as you're liquored up, it goes right by.

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

Kristen Wynns: There was that and they did say, "We were never afraid to say we're sorry." And, I mean, that's pretty amazing. Obviously to last with somebody 80 years, but that is just -- if you can have that shift where you just start to tell yourself that, "Even if I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, even if I don't agree with why her feelings are hurt, I'm just going to say I'm sorry because I care more about her and this relationship than being right."

Lee Rosen: What do these marriages look like when people can't apologize? How do I spot one of those marriages?

Kristen Wynns: Well, a lot of times you see a lot of talking but it's not going anywhere, a lot of people trying to prove their point, get the other one to understand their behavior, a lot of defending their behavior, making excuses for it, and a lot of that going back and forth. But both partners looking frustrated because whatever they're saying is hurting their feelings or causing them to be upset isn't really being acknowledged by the other partner. So a lot of times you just see a lot of blaming the other person, trying to figure out, well, who's the one who's fault it is? Instead of using their time more productively to solve the problem.

Lee Rosen: I can imagine apologies really -- I mean, at some point they only go so far. You know, if you're on the third round of, "I'm really sorry I slept with my secretary," I mean maybe the first time it helps but after a while it's got to kind of lose its impact.

Kristen Wynns: Definitely.

Lee Rosen: You've got to behave fundamentally. I mean, I guess you can make mistakes but you can't just expect to be off the hook every time you say "I'm sorry" if it's the same crazy stuff all the time.

Kristen Wynns: That's exactly right. So obviously the apology has to have the sincere component to it that you're so sorry for the behavior or for what you said that it's your goal to not ever do that again. That's one of the key elements to an apology. A lot of people think the apology is just saying those two words -- "I'm sorry" -- and then moving on, but actually a really good apology has several steps to it and you have to hit all five steps in order for it to be effective. And one of those is obviously making a vow not to repeat the behavior again.

Lee Rosen: Well, give me the five steps because I'm probably going to need them tonight.

Kristen Wynns: Okay. You got your pen ready to jot these down?

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

Lee Rosen: I actually just reached over for a pen, yes.

Kristen Wynns: Okay. So the first step is to acknowledge what you did. And that's pretty obvious. If you don't know, sometimes you can tell that your partner's upset but you don't know what you did so --

Lee Rosen: I'm sorry for whatever I did.

Kristen Wynns: If you're in that position then just say, "I know you're upset. What did I do?" So that's the first step.

Lee Rosen: Can we just go with the general, "Whatever it is, I'm sorry for everything since my birth"?

Kristen Wynns: That would be great. That would be great.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Acknowledge what you did. I'm with you. Okay. Number one.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. Okay. The second step is to acknowledge the effect it had or must have had on your spouse and his or her feelings. That one's pretty easy. You can usually guess how they're feeling or they've told you how they're feeling.

The third step is to express your regret. So that's when you would say things like, "I'm so sorry I did this. I feel terrible. I feel awful for what I did," that kind of thing.

Lee Rosen: Now, you can get into trouble on this one, right? This is the one where you can say, "I'm sorry you're upset and I feel really bad that you're upset."

Kristen Wynns: Oh, that's the worst. Right. That's the worst because then it's like that -- I don't know, quasi-apology that doesn't feel good at all to be on the receiving end of it because you're sort of -- the underlying implication is that you don't understand why they're upset or you don't think they should be upset. So it has to be sincere and saying, "I'm sorry," and not that sneaking little, "I'm sorry you're upset about this."

Lee Rosen: All kidding aside, that's where I think this -- at some level it's like most of us who have been married a while know to apologize.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: But it is easy to screw this up because we really don't believe we were wrong. And so we might launch down this path but when you

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

get to like step number three you're kind of running out of gas. But -  
- okay. So we've got to express regret and --

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: I hear you. It makes sense. But I can see this is where we're starting to hit the roadblocks. Okay. What's number four?

Kristen Wynns: Okay. Number four is to express your resolve that you're not going to make this mistake again. So that's what we were talking about before, that that's the part where you say you're going to try your best not to do whatever it was again in the future.

Lee Rosen: I will not find myself naked with my secretary in the future. I'll do my very best not to have that happen.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Yeah. I got you. Okay. And number five?

Kristen Wynns: Then the fifth one is to ask for forgiveness. And that's actually a piece that many, many couples never get to. They never get to that step. That's a really nice part of the process that gives closure for you to do all these four steps -- say you're sorry, talk about what you did, what you're not going to do again -- but that fifth step for you to say, "Can you forgive me?" is really important because it gives your partner, the one that you hurt, the chance to wrestle with that in his or her mind and say, "Yes, I forgive you. Thank you for giving me this sincere apology." And that's a piece that really gives a sense of closure and ends it on a really good note.

Now, you don't always get the other person to say they forgive you right away because a lot of times if you've really done something that was quite egregious, obviously they're not ready to at that point. And that's okay. You should still offer up that question, "Will you forgive me?" And even if they say, "I'm just not ready right now," it's important that you put that out there, that that's your goal for forgiveness.

Lee Rosen: So you would ask. See, I think at some level I would think step five should -- like, when I'm apologizing she's either going to forgive me or she's not. But it's not really supposed to be on my agenda to say, "Okay. Now do you forgive me?" But you would throw that into the mix, huh?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely, because you're giving them a chance to have a sense of power in the exchange and to process what's just happened and to

give you that. That's obviously a gift that we can always give our partner, or anyone, when we forgive them. So I think it's important that you put that out there that you're sorry but that you also want their forgiveness.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Okay. So now I'm going to put you on the spot. So let's pretend that you and your husband had a big argument this morning and you said something really nasty to him about how he's just so lame at making the kids' lunches.

Kristen Wynns: Okay. I like this one. Okay.

Lee Rosen: And he never makes the lunches right and you just screamed at him. He gets in the car, goes off to work, you go off to work. And you feel really bad about it. You get home at 6:00 tonight and you get everything done with the kids and now you're having your conversation and you're ready to apologize. Model for us the "lame lunch" apology.

Kristen Wynns: Okay. Great. Okay. So first step I'll say, "Kevin, I'm really sorry for what happened this morning when you were making the kids' lunches. I said that you were lame and you always made lame lunches."

And second step, "I know that that frustrates you and makes you angry when I criticize you for the kids' lunches and I'm really sorry. I feel terrible that I did that again."

Fourth step, "I'm really going to work on that and just biting my tongue and letting you handle that. Or, if that continues to be a problem between us, we need to come up with another solution for the lunches. But I'm going to vow that I'm not going to criticize you making the kids' lunches again. Can you forgive me?"

Lee Rosen: Right. That works. That works. I'd forgive you. I'd let you off the hook.

Okay. So when people come in and you see that they're really stuck, that there's been a lot of bad things done by one spouse to the other and that really there does need to be an apology but somebody is really stuck on the idea that they're right and that they shouldn't have to apologize, where do you go with that? What do you do with that couple?

Kristen Wynns: Well, apologizing is a skill and it's a skill that doesn't come naturally to most people. So like with a lot of relationship skills, it's



something that couples just need to practice over and over and over again until it starts to feel more natural.

The biggest thing I think that can help with couples is if they just -- this is sort of referencing what we were talking about before. If they just practice in the moment if they can sense that they've hurt their partners feelings, or their partners standing right there saying, "That really hurt my feelings when you did X, Y, and Z," that they really just train themselves to stop and give an apology in the moment, even if you don't quite understand why they're upset or you truly think that it's ridiculous that they're upset.

The biggest thing for couples is to just have that become a habit and just practice it. And at first it's going to be difficult. I mean, apologizing when you feel like you didn't do anything wrong ranks in the top two things that are hardest about being in a marriage. Most people would rather -- I don't know -- have some kind of physical punishment then to say that because it -- for all the reasons we talked about.

It's really about couples just adopting that as their philosophy that, you know what? No matter what, if you're saying that your feelings are hurt, even if it's because I walked in and put cream cheese on the bagel in a way that offended you, whatever. Even if it's something ridiculous then you're just going to apologize because that's going to come more and more easily once you get in the habit of doing it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. So you just have to build that skill and make it a habit. Is this a quick -- if you identify this problem is this a quick fix for people or does this take session after session to sort of get people to come around?

Kristen Wynns: It really depends. Sometimes people really do have an a-ha moment when it comes to this and it's almost like a physical burden is lifted once they realize, "Wow, I don't have to be right. Or even if I think I'm right, it's more important to focus on my partner's feelings in the relationship." And some people, once they really have that revelation it starts to flow pretty quickly.

Other couples who are really engrained in the blaming each other, defending their actions, justifying themselves why the other person shouldn't be angry, that can sometimes take more work because they are really deeply connected to these bad habits and they have done them for so long that it's hard to let go of them.



March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

So some couples could do this on their own; they could read a book or listen to a podcast like this and say, "Wow, that's true. Being right is not as important as our relationship." Other couples might need to obviously focus on it in therapy where there's someone kind of guiding you through this process reminding you, "Remember, it's about the relationship."

A lot of people -- sort of a cliché. A lot of people think that if you -- what are the three most important words you say in a marriage? Everybody would say "I love you." A lot of relationship experts would disagree and say the three most important words are "I was wrong," which is way harder for us to say. We throw "I love you's" around like it's nothing. I mean, those come out of our mouth all the time. But how many times do you actually look your partner in his or her eye and say, "I was wrong"? I mean, that's way more rare because it's so much more difficult to do.

Lee Rosen: Right. No. Yeah. It is so much harder to do. I think -- and maybe this is why -- I mean, I've been married I guess almost 20 years --

Kristen Wynns: Wow.

Lee Rosen: -- and I think that part of what happens after you've been through this cycle over and over again is that you just recognize that winning doesn't get you anywhere.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: So you're kind of -- I'm a broken man. Like, whatever. Win, lose, I don't care anymore. I just need to get through this latest chaos that I've created, you know?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Well, that's got to be difficult for you, honestly. Depending on your profession it's really difficult because I'm imagining in your job -- you know, in your profession as an attorney -- your day is focused on winning, on having success. And a lot of jobs, if you think about it, people are used to being the expert. They're used to being right. And when you get home and you don't have that dynamic anymore, it is difficult to change your way of thinking that you're on equal footing now and that you're not always going to get the win, necessarily, that it's not about winning and losing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, let's just go back for one second. Let's run through the five steps one more time before we wrap up.

Kristen Wynns: Sure.

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

Lee Rosen: This is what I've got. You tell me if I'm on track. Here is the way to do an apology from an expert: number one, acknowledge what you did; number two, acknowledge the effect that that had on your spouse or on their feelings; number three, express regret, and that means regret about what you did, not about how they feel; number four, express resolve not to do it again; and then number five, ask for forgiveness.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. Those would be great if you could actually list them out on the website so people can be reminded of them because, again, I think most people would focus only on maybe step number three when they apologize. They might say, "I'm sorry," or "I feel terrible." But it really is that full package of the five steps that makes for a really effective apology.

Lee Rosen: See, I'm thinking if we're smart and we want to stay married what we ought to do is write that on a card in our wallet and just have it accessible every day. You know, right after school lunch argument or whatever. Perfect.

Kristen Wynns: I like that. Yeah. Put it on your refrigerator. That'd be great for people to write out those five steps and stick it on their refrigerator with a magnet so you're kind of being reminded of it every time you walk by.

Lee Rosen: Well, I appreciate you being here today and giving us this lesson on apologizing. Thank you so much.

Kristen Wynns: Sure thing. I enjoyed it.

Lee Rosen: You can find out a whole lot about Kristen's practice and counseling services, all the work that she does for couples, for children, group therapy. She has a website at [KristenWynns.com](http://KristenWynns.com). I'm going to put a link to the site in our show notes but I want to go ahead and spell her name for you because it's a little challenging. It's Kristen, K-r-i-s-t-e-n; last name is Wynns, W-y-n-n-s. So [KristenWynns.com](http://KristenWynns.com). You can also call her office at (919) 805-0182.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope you will join us again next week. And we love the e-mails that we get from you, the feedback, the messages, the calls about this show. It is fantastic to get that feedback from you and we really appreciate it and I would love for you to keep it coming.

If you'd like to e-mail us, the e-mail address is [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). We also have a listener comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. We'd love to hear your

March 16, 2009 - I'm Sorry, Really, I'm Sorry!

feedback. If you have ideas for future shows, that very much helps us to plan as we go forward. So all the feedback is really very much appreciated.

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](http://stayhappilymarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com) or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.*