

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.



Family Meetings - Ugh!

This is Episode number 57 of Stay Happily Married, "Family Meetings - Ugh!"

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 am here in the studio with Dr. Kristen Wynns, a licensed psychologist practicing in Durham, North Carolina. I'm sure most of our listeners know Dr. Wynns from her previous episodes. The last one she did with us about apologizing to your spouse is the most downloaded show we've ever done. People are really into learning about apologizing. I guess that's a good thing.

Dr. Wynns holds both a master's degree and a doctorate in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro and has been in private practice for about five years. She specializes in counseling for children and adolescents, marital therapy and parent coaching. She's been married for 10 years, which I think is always a good sign, and she has two daughters.

Welcome back to the show, Kristen.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you could be here today. I am very interested in this topic of family meetings. And you know, a lot of what we talk about is really impacted by the hectic lives that most of us lead today. Everybody's running in every direction and we all have commitments between work and kids' activities and all of that stuff. Everybody's kind of going a mile a minute and it's pretty unusual

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for families today to get together and have any sort of meeting, isn't it?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I think it's unusual for families even to just hang out and have dinner together as a family or do any kind of family activity.

Lee Rosen: Well, I read somewhere that just having dinner had a huge impact on how families -- how things go in families and kids -- how successful they are. Is that true?

Kristen Wynns: It is true. The research on that is fascinating. It's linked to kids' grades; you know, kids who have regular family dinners have higher grades. It's been linked to a lower risk for having alcohol or drug problems with teenagers. It's amazing how something so simple, just sitting down and eating together, is really linked to all these positive outcomes.

Lee Rosen: But is it really -- like families having dinner together, is it the chicken or the egg? Is it those families that have the focus on getting dinner cooked -- which that all by itself, it's like who cooks dinner? It's like, dinner? That's the thing you get at the drive-thru, isn't it? But is it those families have kids that do well because they're organized families that function really well, or is it really the dinners causing that? You know what I mean?

Kristen Wynns: Uh-huh. That's a really good question.

Lee Rosen: You're the scientist.

Kristen Wynns: Yeah. That's actually a really good question. And it's probably a little bit of both, like you're saying. There may be some families that already have these great family communication habits, they're spending time with each other in place and they would naturally have dinner too. That's probably likely. But it also is the importance of just sitting down as a family for that 30, 45 minutes. That alone is a chance for families to talk and communicate and catch up and that alone has the positive effects.

Lee Rosen: You have two kids, right? How old are they?

Kristen Wynns: Five and three.

Lee Rosen: And do you really sit down for 30 to 45 minutes for dinner? Because I'm thinking like our dinners -- when we have everybody show up, which is fairly unusual, and nobody's eating the same thing --

Kristen Wynns: Oh, really?

- Lee Rosen: It's like my wife is cooking something and she and I are eating it, maybe our daughter is eating some component of it, and our son is zapping like a frozen meal and bringing it to the table. That's a family dinner at our house. But we claim to be dysfunctional so we're good with that. But do you really -- like in your house do you actually sit down regularly for like half an hour with all four of you at the table?
- Kristen Wynns: We really do. Now, the 5-year-old eats pretty quickly so she might be ready to leave after 20 minutes, but we do sit down. When I'm at home -- I have two evenings where I'm at work, but when I'm at home we sit down as a family and we're actually all eating the same thing for the most part, unless they're being picky.
- Lee Rosen: I want video of this. I want to know that this is actually happening.
- Kristen Wynns: Yeah. Some evidence that I'm not just making this up.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Well, do you think -- is that really uncommon that you're -- I mean, you're a psychologist. So you're thinking, okay, we have to have a normal family, and you're trying to make it work. But are the rest of us doing this at all or are we all eating in front of the TV with everybody at their own TV set?
- Kristen Wynns: I think that is really common. I mean, that seems to be more the norm than the ideal picture we just painted of everybody sitting around the table. And I think it's an issue of schedules, like you were saying, that sometimes everyone is just not at home in the evening. Somebody's at soccer practice or someone's working late. But also, even if they are home, like you say, the teenagers might grab their food and run off and sit in front of the computer. Dad might go off in his study to watch something on TV. So everyone's kind of doing their own thing and not really making it a priority to sit down together.
- Lee Rosen: That's reality in America today for most of us.
- Kristen Wynns: It is.
- Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, and it would be my reality except that my wife won't let me watch TV while we eat so --
- Kristen Wynns: That's good. Good for her.
- Lee Rosen: Yeah. I have to talk to her. Although I do love the TV. It never says anything nasty to me. It's my best friend.

Seriously, when you look at the big picture and you look at families -- you're meeting with families and parents and kids all day long and you're learning about what's really going on. What do you see -- what kind of problems come out of this lost time together as a family? What does that create for us?

Kristen Wynns: I think a lot of times it results in family members feeling disconnected from each other, that they kind of feel like the ship's passing in the night, that they communicate in sound bytes where they really quick spit out what's going on for the day or what they need from their parents or what the parents need from the kids but there's not that emotional connection where they really feel like everybody is a part of a team and loves and supports each other. So I think that's the biggest outcome, besides some of the other things we were talking about earlier, that in some unusual ways it spills over into other things like how kids do in school, their friendships, that kind of thing. But just on a basic level I think the feeling of connectedness is sometimes lacking.

Lee Rosen: So you see fallout both with the couple -- the husband and the wife - - and fallout for the kids. I mean, when you're not getting together and communicating, that causes ripples throughout the whole household.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. That's really interesting. Would you agree if the kids are getting off track -- you know, if you're not having that kid time and communicating and connecting and all that -- that all of the kid problems then impact the marriage. The marriage problems then impact the kids. I mean, you get into sort of a vicious cycle, don't you, of things accelerating and falling apart?

Kristen Wynns: Oh, sure. And you see that kind of downward spiral and sometimes it doesn't result in horrible outcomes but again, if kids are kind of doing their thing and they're so busy rushing around that they aren't getting support and quality time with parents, and parents are so busy rushing around that they're not spending quality time with each other, they're more like co-team captains for a sports team or business partners, then eventually those things if they continue just lead to other bad habits of not really taking the time to support each other, spend time with each other, and then again you're left with people feeling disconnected and not like they're a part of a team.

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Lee Rosen: Okay. So let's talk about this term "family meetings." When you talk about family meetings are you really focusing on -- is it just dinner or are you talking about some kind of -- I mean, it almost feels a little bit like, oh, we're going to have a convention. We're all going to the -- and it feels like when you say family meeting it's something that is about a crisis or something really bad has happened; we must have a meeting now. What's it all about?

Kristen Wynns: Right. I think that a lot of families do think of family meetings that way, that it's only if there's a crisis they need to call a family meeting. You know, the parents find out that their teenager's smoking marijuana and they say, "That's it. We're calling a family meeting."

Lee Rosen: I'm just calling the police. Yeah. Let me know when he gets out.

Kristen Wynns: I think a lot of times it is in response to an emergency, something that's happened with one family member. But the ideal way to have family meetings is to just set aside a weekly time for everyone to get together; share their thoughts, what's on their mind; to plan for things. And although it can happen during dinner, a lot of times it's more helpful if it follows dinner or some time in the afternoon where everyone's really relaxed, they have time to sit down for an hour and everyone can just go around and everyone has a chance to share what's on his or her mind. So it's more of a planned thing.

And family dinners are great and if that's the only time you do have to touch base, that's fine. But even better would be to set aside a specific time every week where everyone comes and it's very relaxed and planned in advance that we're going to sit down and talk and catch up.

Lee Rosen: You know, it's funny because it sounds like a nice idea and it sounds very practical, but when I sit here and apply it to my life with two teenagers, literally finding a time in the world that we live in between softball practice and school and a girlfriend and all of that stuff, wow. It's just a nightmare trying to find -- I don't know when everybody is at home for an hour or a half an hour at any single time. It's crazy.

Kristen Wynns: It's tough. And that's why a lot of times it's really helpful if families can start this habit with little kids. If you start it when your children are young and they just get in the groove that every Sunday afternoon everyone's going to slow down, come together in the living room for an hour, by the time they're teenagers it's just a part of their lifestyle and they know to expect it and everyone's kind of made it a priority to set aside that time.

But even with the scenario that you described where maybe you haven't been having them and right now you've got two teenagers and you're trying to figure out how to get everybody together, there's always a little bit of time you can carve out if people just make it a priority to look at schedules and say, okay, when do we all overlap? Even if it is a Sunday afternoon for an hour, or a Saturday afternoon or Saturday morning, whatever works with everybody's schedule.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you're the guru and you know all about this stuff. Would you suggest that everyone listening this Sunday round up the spouse, the kids and start having a meeting; or do they need to do stuff to get ready for that?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Well, that's a good question. I think ideally families would already have some really healthy communication habits in place. Because the concern would be if you have some really unhealthful habits in place where people are venting their anger inappropriately or they're cutting each other off because they're always anticipating what the other person's going to say. If you have some really bad communication habits in place, then a family meeting is not going to feel as warm and cozy to everybody. It's not going to feel as productive.

But if families make the effort to try to improve family communication overall and make sure there's this mutual respect for each other, then family meetings have a lot better chance of succeeding over the long term, that it's not just going to be a one-time thing. So I think if parents are interested in starting family meetings, that's great. And they can use it as a chance just to analyze their family overall and look at areas that they might start improving how they communicate with each other.

Lee Rosen: So we're all -- we get together. It's Sunday afternoon, 4:00, nice beautiful day and we gather in the living room with the windows open and the pollen blowing through and we're ready to have this first family meeting. What are your guidelines for making that productive?

Kristen Wynns: Well, I think definitely having a time limit is good, especially for teenagers so they're not rolling their eyes the whole time thinking, "Oh, my gosh, is this going to go on forever?" But you've already said at the outset, "Okay. We're going to sit down for an hour. Everyone's going to have a chance to talk."

That's the important piece is that it's not parent-led where it's like a business meeting where the parents are standing up and lecturing about, "We need to do this," or "This is going wrong." But it's really a very mutual kind of meeting where everybody gets a chance to say their piece, gets a chance to talk about their goals for the next week, their plans, their successes they've had, a problem they have that they want feedback on. And it's actually helpful if the kids go first because then they're not influenced by the parents' opinion.

So the basics would be that it lasts for an hour. Everyone has a chance to talk. And it's nice to end it with something positive like a family game or dessert or some kind of a project just so that it ends on a positive note and it makes the kids want to come back for more the next week.

Lee Rosen: If I had realized there was going to be dessert involved I would have been much more enthusiastic about this from the beginning.

Kristen Wynns: Oh, okay. So play that up with your kids.

Lee Rosen: Sure. Yeah. Okay. Let me ask you this. Are there things at the meeting -- are there no-nos, things we really should not do at this meeting?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I think the temptation would be for parents to use it as a chance to lecture the kids on all the things that they haven't been doing well at home.

Lee Rosen: We wouldn't have time for that. It's only an hour.

Kristen Wynns: Right. So even if parents are venting a little bit -- if you want the kids to be invested it can't be a time of everybody griping about what went wrong the past week or what the kids are doing wrong.

And it's also unhelpful if parents try to use it to really focus on one kid and solving their problem, almost like a mini therapy session. That's not helpful because then it takes the focus from being this collaborative mutual kind of thing to just focusing on one person and what's wrong with them. So definitely to keep it positive, to keep the lectures out, to keep the complaining out, and to just focus on each person having a chance to talk in a positive, uplifting way helps make them more productive and effective.

Lee Rosen: Sounds good. I mean, so far I think you're selling me on the idea. I just don't know if I can -- I might have to buy like some handcuffs or something to get everybody in the first time.

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Kristen Wynns: There you go.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. You know, those little plastic ones. They would be good, anyway. But what I want to know is, so let's say we're doing this and things are -- it's going reasonably well. This is fundamentally a show about staying married. Is this family meeting thing -- is it just good for the kids or do you see it having much of an impact on the marriage?

Kristen Wynns: I think it's great for marriages, especially marriages where there are kids involved. But even married couples who don't have kids, it's a great idea to have a weekly meeting where you just talk about your weeks and your plans and your concerns. It's great even if you don't have kids but especially parents with children. It helps enhance the marriage because you're feeling more connected as a team, as co-parents.

lot of times when you have kids you're doing the tag team parenting, where one parent takes the son off to soccer practice while the other parent takes the girl off to the grocery store. And then at home you've got one parent doing homework duty while the other parent's on bath duty. So a lot of time it's like tag team parenting and you're never really together as a team, parenting the kids together.

So family meetings are great because for the parents they're getting a chance to be allied in front of the kids. They're getting a chance to work together, make sure they're on the same page with what their goals are for the kids, what the rules are. There's no miscommunication with trying to understand the aftermath -- you know, you walk in and you see your one kid who's just been punished and you're not sure why. But it gets them on the same page where they know about what the goals are, what the rules are.

And for kids it's great to see their parents in that way because they see their parents as a team and they would be less likely to play the parents off of each other. You know, if you never seen your parents together then you might not think of them as being a team, that they're on the same page. But this family meeting allows the parents to really feel connected together; and for the kids to see that too is great.

Lee Rosen: Communicates that whole united front.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Right. And in fact you are united.

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Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's very interesting. Let me ask you, when you're seeing folks in your private practice do you talk about family meetings? I would assume most of the people you're seeing come in to you and they don't do this, right?

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So are you saying to them, "Hey, go do it"?

Kristen Wynns: I do. But it's also part of kind of a multi-step family communication plan. I mean, if you think about it, almost like the four food groups, that you have to have all four food groups to be healthy. Family meetings would be one component of a balanced family life. The other parts would be family dinners, like we talked about; spending one-on-one quality time with each kid. So family meetings are definitely an important part of the overall plan of spending time together, being connected, making it a priority to communicate.

And clearly in my practice when parents take the time to do that, they have positive results. And even something as simple -- I know this is not exactly on the topic but even something as simple as taking 20 minutes to spend with their child one-on-one. Even that has really positive effects.

So all the more if families are making a concerted effort on a regular basis to touch base and spend time with each other and care enough about what's going on in each other's lives and that really does help in a number of ways with the kids' problems, if they're having behavior problems, emotional problems, whatever; or with the marriage problems.

Lee Rosen: So the bottom line is, in your practice this works.

Kristen Wynns: Definitely.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, that's good. Good that you come in here and advocate something that actually works. I like it.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: We all appreciate that. That really is cool. I'm excited about it. I think six, eight months, a couple years from now I should have this going at my house.

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Kristen Wynns: Yeah. With teenagers you can start small. But the biggest thing is --

Lee Rosen: If we just hang on for six or seven years they'll both be gone in college and then we can have a meeting.

Kristen Wynns: That's right. Well, teenagers are egocentric, let's remember that -- as are toddlers. So if you make the meetings about them and it gives them a chance to actually talk about what's on their mind, what they're excited about, what they want to do, what their goals are, then teenagers buy into it because they love to talk about themselves. They love for the attention to be on them. So if you kind of frame it that way -- "this is a chance for us to hear from you. We want to hear what's on your mind" -- then you might be surprised at how interested they are in being a part of it.

Lee Rosen: Once again, it may take more than an hour. I have one teenager -- oh, an hour, he would just get started. Great guy, though. Great guy.

Well, thank you so much for being here today, Kristen. I really appreciate your advice on family meetings. That was terrific. Thanks so much.

Kristen Wynns: Sure thing.

Lee Rosen: Let me again -- thank you, Dr. Wynns. I appreciate you being here. And I hope that those of you listening are going to give it a try. What have you got to lose? Set up a meeting or two and if you're getting positive results then set up another meeting or two and just kind of move forward and see what goes on. It sounds to me like an absolutely worthwhile endeavor. Give it a shot. See what happens. And hopefully it helps your marriage as well as the rest of your whole family.

If you'd like to learn more about Kristen Wynns, she has a website. And I want to spell it for you because her name is -- I think, at least -- slightly tricky. The website is KristenWynns.com. And I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes so that you can shoot right over there and check it out. You can also reach her at her office at (919) 805-0182.

Thank you so much for listening today. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your e-mails and calls commenting on the shows and giving us feedback about what to do next and suggestions about each of the shows as we do them. So please keep doing that. The comment line is (919) 256-3083 and the e-mail address is comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Let us know how we're doing. We really appreciate all of the feedback that you give us.

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

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