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Keeping Your Marriage Healthy During Pregnancy

This is Episode number 73 of Stay Happily Married, "Keeping Your Marriage Healthy During Pregnancy."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by telephone with Dr. Kristen Wynns. Kristen is a licensed psychologist who has just moved her practice to Cary, North Carolina.

Now, I'm sure that many of you remember her from a previous episode or two. Dr. Wynns holds a master's degree and a doctorate in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro and she's been in private practice for five years. She specializes in counseling for children and adolescents, marital therapy, does some parent coaching. She's been married for 10 years and she has two daughters, 3 years old and 5 years old.

Kristen, welcome to the show. How are you doing today?

Kristen Wynns: I'm good. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: You just moved your practice to Cary from the other side of the Triangle, right?

Kristen Wynns: That's right. From Durham.

Lee Rosen: And how are things going in Cary?

Kristen Wynns: It's great in Cary. I love it. There are a lot of advantages but the one I'm most excited about is it's closer to home for me.

Lee Rosen: Oh, that's good.

Kristen Wynns: So I don't have quite as much of a commute. But it's going well and I love my new office.

Lee Rosen: Do you find -- and people that are listening to us around the country and around the world might not know that people that live in the Triangle sort of -- I live in Cary and we all sort of joke about the, I guess, anal retentive nature of the -- or reputation of the citizenry of Cary.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: And you've moved from one side of the Triangle to the other. Any truth to that rumor or are people just people everywhere?

Kristen Wynns: I think it's pretty similar. The big difference I notice is that people in Cary seem willing to drive anywhere, but people in Durham and Raleigh are more hesitant to come to little Cary. So that's the biggest difference I've noticed.

Lee Rosen: They're afraid of Cary. Okay.

Kristen Wynns: I think so.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, Cary is known as a community that has -- that's very kid-friendly. A lot of children. And our topic today, we're talking about figuring out how to keep the marriage working while you're -- when you're pregnant and when you're having a baby. And I'm guessing you're seeing a lot of that in Cary.

We sort of joke about women behaving differently or I guess feeling differently when they're pregnant, and therefore as a husband I always joked about my wife kind of acting differently. It really wasn't a joke. But what is going on with women? What kind of physical or hormonal changes really are happening with women when they're pregnant?

Kristen Wynns: Right. It's pretty significant and I think everyone knows someone who's been pregnant, especially if you've been married to someone who's pregnant. You can kind of see that there are some definite changes caused by the hormones that are really out of the wife's control. I mean, it affects her moods; affects her sleepiness; she might be more irritated or more teary; might be more emotional in

general. So those are real changes that happen; it's not just some convenient excuse for women to get away with bad behavior. So it's a lot that happens quickly with women's bodies and their hormones that really affect their personality and their mood.

Lee Rosen: Do you see that having an impact on their relationships with their spouses?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. A lot of times I think the husbands are a bit baffled as to what's going on because it's supposed to be such an exciting, happy time, so why is their wife crying all the time or why is she losing her temper easily? So I think sometimes it is difficult for the husband to understand why she's going through these changes. And sometimes, just like with postpartum depression, sometimes women will actually have a bit of depression that goes along with the early pregnancy and that's difficult for husbands to understand too.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, what about husbands? And again, it's a never ending discussion about pregnancy where I live in Cary, but we do talk about husbands sort of being -- having their own version of pregnancy. Are there emotional things that go on? Are there issues that come up for husbands during the pregnancy of the family?

Kristen Wynns: I think so. I think a lot of times it does depend on the husband but I know that some husbands can actually become quite anxious during pregnancy that they take on a lot of the worrying. They're concerned about their wife, making sure she's taking care of herself. They're concerned about the baby, making sure that the wife is doing what she needs to be doing to keep the baby healthy.

So a lot of times you'll see men have a bit of anxiety that comes up during the pregnancy as well as some of the other feelings we talked about, not really understanding their wives and getting frustrated with what she's going through, maybe feeling left out of some of what's going on with the wife because she's the one that gets to have all the fun with all the pregnancy-related attention.

Lee Rosen: Right. I've heard psychologists talk about something with husbands about limelight or something. What is that all about?

Kristen Wynns: Right. That's basically where the pregnant wife definitely gets more of the attention. She gets to experience all of the fun stuff with the baby moving and everyone wants to come up and touch her stomach and ask her questions and she gets to have all these doctors' appointments.

And a lot of times if couples aren't careful to make sure that they include the husband for all of those important steps then he might feel like he's in the back seat kind of sitting there with his hands thrown up like, "Well, I thought I was an important part of this. I helped make this baby. Why is she getting all the attention?" So it's important that couples make sure to be aware of that issue and to make sure he's not feeling jealous or resentful, that he's excluded from all the attention that comes with being pregnant.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes sense. You know, I don't mean to trivialize it but I know from experience that if you think you're in the back seat during the pregnancy, just wait until the baby comes. That's a -

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: You're really getting in the back -- nobody even remembers you're around at that point.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, what about -- I have a brother-in-law that has now got four kids. I only have two. I know you have two. But does it get easier when you go to number two, number three, number four?

Kristen Wynns: I think in some ways it does. In some ways you're pros at dealing with the physical and emotional changes; you know to expect those so you're kind of ready to handle those. But if you think about it, with each new child you have that also is some new challenges because you're having to deal with your other kids. The first pregnancy you might have the luxury of napping for hours on Saturday and Sunday to catch up on sleep. You can go to doctors' appointments and just sit in the waiting room reading your entertainment magazines.

Then you fast forward to baby two or three or four and you've got other children to deal with. So it creates its own challenges where you have to entertain your other children when you're at doctors appointments. You can't sleep as much as you did during the first pregnancy. A lot of times couples are frantically trying to potty train another child or move them into a big kid bed. So there are a lot of other challenges that make any pregnancy difficult.

Lee Rosen: Your life is just so much more complicated. I guess that can put additional stress on any marriage when you throw so much more at the couple. That makes a lot of sense.

Kristen Wynns: Sure.

Lee Rosen: I've heard that the first year after the baby comes can be really a tough year on a lot of marriages. Is that true?

Kristen Wynns: It's true. And if you were to map out marital satisfaction levels throughout a couple's relationship, you would see that right after a couple has a baby there's a sharp decline in marital satisfaction levels.

And what research has found, though, that's promising is they found that if you can maintain -- if you have a high quality of your friendship and relationship before the baby arrives, that can actually protect you against that sharp decline in satisfaction. So it's really important -- they discovered that if you can focus before you have the baby on your problem solving, your conflict management skills, just spending time together to build up the friendship, then you can have less of a decline in your satisfaction than other couples who don't focus on that pre-baby.

Lee Rosen: What about the folks that hold off on having kids? Which seems to be more and more common where people are waiting a little bit later in the marriage to go ahead and have kids. Do those folks have -- is pregnancy any different for them than it is for these couples that, ka-boom, married and pregnant three months later?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I mean, there are definite advantages to waiting a few years into your marriage before you have a child. And I haven't read this number anywhere necessarily, but in my mind I sort of have this magic number of five years is a really nice period to wait to have kids because then you've really got a firm foundation established in your marriage and it just makes dealing with some of these stresses easily, especially after you have the baby.

If you have a nice foundation where you spent a few years together really solidifying your husband and wife relationship then it makes it somewhat easier to deal with the stress in the middle of the night when you're yelling at each other about whose turn it is to change the diaper and you're exhausted. It's nice to have that foundation.

That doesn't mean that couples are doomed to fail if they have a baby nine months after they get married, or earlier, but I think they just have more challenges because there's not as much time for that marriage to mature.

Lee Rosen: I was just sitting here doing the math and I think we were married four years and five months before kid number one. It's like, we're doomed. We're doomed; we didn't wait that extra six months.

Kristen Wynns: That's pretty solid.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, a lot of folks are pregnant before they get married. I mean, that's not extraordinary. That's pretty -- I hear that story everyday.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, let me ask you this now. You've got -- we all have been raised in different ways. We've all got these different family experiences. And I think that so much of the way we raise our children is based upon what was -- how we were raised. We learn from our parents and we assume that -- since we have only been through it once, we assume that was a pretty good approach. Or we think it was a terrible approach, one or the other.

But do you see couples that really get stuck in disagreements about what their approach is going to be, what their style is going to be to parenting?

Kristen Wynns: I think so. Pregnancy is a pretty interesting time where parents-to-be really get their first taste of their spouse's -- not necessarily parenting style but more of their parenting philosophy where maybe they realize that their spouse is really a worrier when it comes about health and that they're really shocked that their spouse is really monitoring the wife's diet or what she's exposed to or how much sleep she's getting.

So a lot of times, unless couples have talked about it in advance, they are caught off guard by really different philosophies. Maybe one parent-to-be is very relaxed and laid back and just knows everything's going to be okay, and maybe she's married to someone who's more by the book and wants to follow all the recommendations and what to expect.

So you do see parents have their eyes open for the first time during pregnancy to some differences and it's important that they obviously communicate about that then versus putting it on the backburner, waiting for the baby to arrive and hoping that things sort themselves out then.

Lee Rosen: Well, yeah. I guess you just hadn't really had to address these issues before. You'd never really thought about them. Do you encourage couples, even before they're pregnant, to sort of evaluate these kinds of things and figure out where they each stand? How do you do that?

Kristen Wynns: Well, sure. In an ideal world couples would talk about these things before they're even pregnant, just when they're thinking about "it's about time for us to have a baby." They would already get some of the books, *What to Expect* kind of books or parenting books to read about some different issues. And just even reading those books together could open the lines to communication where they can talk about, okay, how do we feel about co-sleeping? How do we feel about letting our baby cry it out?

And if they already have had a good opportunity to discuss those things again before they're even pregnant or before the baby arrives, they're not going to be dealing with having arguments when hormones are also in the room and tired parents are in the room. It just makes it easier to have those talks in advance.

Lee Rosen: You already have your plan in place. That does make a lot of sense. Yeah. Very interesting. It's funny because all those issues -- I mean, I have a 12 year old and now a 15 year old and you mention all those issues and I'm sure we didn't talk about them before we had children and now that we're at this end of the spectrum I barely remember those issues. All those things seem so important during that period and now it's like, oh, we've got other problems to address. They've filled that space, you know?

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It is. It's very interesting. What about if a couple is pregnant right now? Somebody saw this podcast and thought, "Oh, boy. I need to listen to that." What are the things that they ought to be most focused on in terms of making sure their marriage doesn't fall apart as they go through creating this baby?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely what we've been talking about with communication. I would rank that pretty high up, that they just talk about as many of these topics as they can. And not only just baby stuff but also just to keep communicating about how they're feeling. If they are feeling anxious and they're surprised at that, to be able to talk about that. If they're feeling depressed and they don't understand that, that they can talk about that. So just to really make sure they're still talking to each other is huge.

Also, a close second to that would be to make sure they're still making time for each other and spending good quality time with each other. There's this new phrase called a babymoon that people have adopted, where you go off on one last big trip before you have a baby. And I really like the idea of that, actually, that you have one

last chance to just get away from the normal stresses of life and go off and have a trip together and really just spend some good bonding time. And of course, if you don't have the money to go someplace exotic you could have a babymoon at home. Just lock all the doors and don't answer the phone and spend some time playing games and watching movies. So that kind of thing is important.

Also, just what we were talking about before with the limelight effect, just to make sure that the husband is being included in all the different steps of pregnancy. That the wife is making sure that he's invited along to doctors appointments, especially to big appointments where they'll have an ultrasound or something like that where they can see the baby, that he's included in that. That he's able to come to some of the showers maybe and help open presents. Any of those things just to make sure that they feel like a good twosome and that they're partners in this and it's not just the wife running the show and the husband is just kind of there to help carry boxes from the shower.

Lee Rosen: Right. That is good advice. You mentioned people not having enough money for the babymoon trip, which I think is a funny -- I like that idea. Funny title. Sounds like it was probably invented by the travel industry but, yeah, everybody loves a trip together and time together so I think it's a smart idea. But this is a time where it does seem like everybody is experiencing if not financial trouble at least some anxiety about finances. And that's just an issue for everybody. Do you see that putting an extra stress on families that are having kids?

Kristen Wynns: Sure. But like you said, I think that that happens no matter when couples are thinking about getting pregnant or are pregnant for the first time. I think a lot of times couples focus on the big picture and you hear these mind-blowing statistics about how much money you'll spend before your child is 18 and it's enough to make anybody want to postpone getting pregnant because those numbers are just unbelievable.

So a lot of couples get focused on that and get worried and think, "We'll never have enough money to have a baby." It's sort a cliché but it's definitely true that if you wait until you feel really financially stable and ready to have a baby, 99 percent of people would never get pregnant because you never feel exactly like you've got enough money that you're ready to dive into this.

And the most important thing is just to look at the small picture. Okay, we need to have some kind of savings in place. But they have to keep in mind that a lot of times that first year or two of having a

baby you've gotten a ton of gifts from showers, you've gotten a ton of hand-me-downs, you can get a lot of stuff like diapers and things like that from other people or from gifts. So it's important to just look at the small piece of the puzzle and just be smart about it. Start a savings plan but don't get overwhelmed with the first 18 years of your child's life or you'll never have the guts to go for it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Not to frighten any new parents out there or people that are pregnant, but my 15 year old is about to get onto our auto insurance when he turns 16. It's ridiculously expensive, although whatever they're charging is not -- it's worth it. I've driven with the kid and they're not charging nearly enough. He's already hit the garage once. So we'll -- yeah. Whatever we pay, I'm sure we'll be happy to pay it for them.

Kristen Wynns: Right. Exactly. Those are the things that come later on. I mean, thinking about saving for college or for all the extracurricular stuff, so that you've got plenty of time to worry about later.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Lots to worry about. Don't worry about anything more than the immediate stuff. I hear you.

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Nobody would ever have a baby if they actually knew.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: We have covered a lot of ground and I do feel like we've helped some folks think about some issues and head in the right direction. Do you find that people end up -- do you get calls from people where they're pregnant and they're really in crisis right in the middle of that -- I mean, it's really nine months and probably not that many of them have the potential for crisis. But do you get sort of you're the emergency room for pregnant people kinds of calls sometimes?

Kristen Wynns: It's interesting. I see more situations where I might have a pregnant mom in the office and she's dealing with other things and the pregnancy is just one more thing that is a stressor in the mix. So not necessarily that they're coming specifically for pregnancy-related stressors but I've had a lot families where the mom is pregnant with the second or third child and she's also dealing with another child who's got emotional or behavior problems or she's dealing with marital conflict. So you see those things as just one more thing in the mix that an individual or a couple has to deal with that just --

like we talked about before, can be another set of stressors that comes along with being pregnant.

Lee Rosen: It might be the pregnancy was the straw that broke the camel's back and got them in to get some help in the first place. Very interesting.

Kristen Wynns: Could be.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, Kristen, thank you so much for being with us. I really appreciate your good advice and your taking the time to share it with us. Thank you.

Kristen Wynns: Sure.

Lee Rosen: If you are interested in getting more information about Kristen's practice, she has a website you can visit, KristenWynns.com. Now, let me spell that for you because Kristen is one of those names I think you could spell it a lot of different ways. And Wynns; wait until you hear how that's spelled. It's K-r-i-s-t-e-n W-y-n-n-s. And I will put a link to the website in our show notes so that you can just click right on it. You can also call her office for more information at (919) 805-0182.

She's also writing a blog that is updated very regularly and it's all about -- it's called Marriage and Parenting 101. And that's at KristenWynns.wordpress.com, so check that out.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will come back and listen next week. We would love to hear your feedback, really appreciate all the feedback we get every single week. Several ways you can get to us. One, you can put a comment on the site at StayHappilyMarried.com. Number two, you can call our comment line at (919) 256-3083. and number three, you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We love to hear your ideas for upcoming shows and your feedback on the shows we've already done, so please keep in touch and let us know how we're doing.

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

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