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Do You Treat Your Spouse Like a Child?

This is Episode number 74 of Stay Happily Married, "Do You Treat Your Spouse Like a Child?"

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 by telephone with Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones. She is a psychologist who has been practicing for more than 10 years and she works with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. She has a master's degree in forensic psychology and a doctorate in clinical psychology and she conducts psycho-educational trainings and teaches university students, does a lot of really interesting stuff.

Today's show, "Do You Treat Your Spouse Like a Child?" is the result of an e-mail from one of our listeners. So thank you for sending in your comments and giving us show ideas; we really appreciate that. Let me tell you, if you have ideas about shows you'd like to hear, topics you'd like us to cover, or guests you'd like us to interview, the easiest way to get up with us -- well, there are a couple of ways. One is to leave a comment right here at StayHappilyMarried.com. Another is to e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. And finally, you can call us at our comment line which is (919) 256-3083. And I don't believe we would have done this show, probably would not have occurred to us, if it had not been for your comments. So let's get the show on the road.

Welcome to the show, Katrina.

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Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: I'm really glad you could be here again. And this is not your first time; you have some experience helping us with these issues. And this topic is -- the whole issue of how you treat your spouse and communication issues and all of that, I do feel like I see people that just are not giving their spouse the respect they deserve. One spouse will find themselves really being treated like a child. Have you had experiences with people like that?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah. And of course, as I say with a lot of things, it's usually a number of things in combination working together and that's not just one person. It's usually kind of the dynamic of that relationship that allows that type of thing to happen.

Lee Rosen: Well, when we talk about -- like, I think of my kids who are definitely treated like children. I mean, I guess we don't tell them to brush their teeth anymore; we've sort of accepted that those teeth belong to you and you'll have to deal with it. But our kids still have to be told even at age 12 and 15 it's time to go to bed now, that sort of thing. Do you see spouses literally treating their spouse in that way, like you would treat your kid?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah. I mean, I think sometimes it's a matter of kind of -- really what is the intention? So sometimes people really have the intention of this is the way I want things to be and I'm going to tell you how to do it. And so they do seem to be treating their spouse like a child.

But then I think sometimes what happens is that the one person may not be pulling their weight in the relationship and so the other person gets frustrated and is trying to get them to do things.

Or the other partner sometimes can be just passive and not even trying to participate in a number of ways and so the other partner, the partner who seems controlling, is just kind of trying to pick up the slack. So it's kind of a matter of perception.

Lee Rosen: So is it more husbands or wives who are taking on this controlling sort of parental role?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Oh, now you're going to get me in trouble.

Lee Rosen: That's my goal. Yeah.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think it depends on what the controlling is about. Men seem to try to control about certain things and women seem to try to control about other kinds of things. Women seem to control about chores, who's taking care of the kids, what kind of a relationship you have with your parents or your in-laws, that type of thing.

Men seem to have more controlling issues about decisions, making decisions for the family, how money is spent, who you spend time with; and then also kind of some body issues in the sense of like what are you wearing? Is that too sexy? Is that too pretty? And believe it or not, even people have arguments over I'm driving; why do we have to stop every 10 minutes so that you can go to the bathroom.

Lee Rosen: Really? Well, I do know my wife is always worried about that my clothes make me look too sexy so -- not so much. Don't wear that; you look too hot. Okay.

But I really do think -- like, when you talk about that I can see some of that in -- probably in a lot of marriages. I mean, my wife is very big on yelling upstairs, "The dishwasher is empty." That's what she says. The implication being, "Fill it up."

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: And it is like -- at least on that topic -- like I probably would not pay a lot of attention to those dishes but for the fact that I had that reminder delivered to me. And so is there -- with things like that, I mean, where do you draw the line? Where is it -- gosh, I mean, my guess is if she didn't say it I might not really ever do it. So is there a problem with her doing that? Is that really going too far?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think it depends on kind of what your intention is behind the message. So are you saying that -- do you have an agreement, even if it's an unspoken agreement, about these are your chores around the house or these are the things that you're doing in this relationship and these are the things that I do in the relationship.

So if you have some sort of agreement and the other person is reminding you that you're not living up to your agreement, then that's a little bit different than this is the way I think it should be done regardless of whether you agree with me or not and I'm going to try to make you do it my way. Then it's kind of stepping

over the line. It's the idea of making a suggestion is different than making a demand.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: And so if you're kind of delivering it as a suggestion then you have to understand that the other person gets to not do what you suggest. If you're delivering it as a demand then really being able to think about is this an appropriate demand? Is this something I should be demanding? Can I be demanding this? That type of thing.

Lee Rosen: Is there an objective reality of what you can demand or does that just depend on the relationship?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think it depends on the relationship and what kind of expectations you have of one another. And if the expectation is that you're always going to mow the lawn and you haven't mowed the lawn in four weeks and it's growing out of control, then saying, "Okay. You're the one in charge of mowing the lawn. When is that going to get done?"

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, is there a -- and I buy that it does vary by relationship, that some people would perceive something as controlling and other people might perceive it as just a friendly reminder. But when do you step -- is there a line of where it really starts to look pretty unhealthy and that it's going to put the marriage in jeopardy where somebody is just too controlling, too much the parent, too much the boss, I guess, in the relationship?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah. I mean, I think -- well, certainly if there's any sort of aggressiveness behind it. So whether it's physical violence or emotional abuse in the sense of saying really unkind things to people, that certainly steps over the line. But also thinking about things like what is -- again, kind of what is your intention behind it? And if your intention is that I want to control you then that's really stepping over the line, versus I really just want the dishes to be done. So what is it about? And thinking about that in the sense of trying to decide, am I stepping over the line or not?

Lee Rosen: So you've used the word "intention" probably 10 times. And so what I hear you with that saying is that if you're a jerk and you mean -- what you want is sort of mean-spirited and malicious then it's going to be a problem. But if you're just saying the same things but you really have your heart in the right place, it might or might not be a problem I guess.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right. And I think of even, for example, you can say something accidentally. Like, "Well, I don't mind letting you go out." Letting me? You know. Then it's a matter of, well, did you really mean "letting" me or did you just mean, "I don't really mind if you go out"? And how does the other person hear that as well? I mean, if my husband said that to me I'd be like, "Oh, thanks, honey. I appreciate it. Ha-ha-ha." You know, like, I wouldn't take it as that's what he really meant because I would know better, as would he. But, you know -- so kind of thinking along those lines.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it makes sense. Now, are there couples that are more inclined to get into this kind of dynamic where one is being controlling? Like, for instance, what if -- you see the marriages where the husband is much older than the wife, for instance. Do things like that create this scenario more often than not?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Again, of course it always depends on the couple. I do think that you tend to see older partners being more demanding of younger partners regarding money and maybe who they spend their time with because, depending on how much of an age gap there is, there might be really different expectations for different generations and things of that nature.

And also role expectations. So if you are 15 years old then you might have different expectations about who's supposed to take care of the bills, who's supposed to take care of the chores, whether or not it's okay for you to have friends of the opposite sex.

But I think you also see it with people who really just don't have great self-esteem and so it makes them feel smart, powerful, important to be able to control somebody else. You see it with people who are not just overtly controlling but also kind of passive-aggressive, where they don't know how to manage their own anger and so they find ways to, by not doing something, trying to control their partner. If I don't ever put the dishes away then I'm the one who's winning, in a sense. That kind of feeling of I'm not going to do what you want.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's very interesting. And I'm probably slightly off on a tangent here but this idea that people will be more controlling if they have low self-esteem or -- this is sort of their chance to be in charge of something or someone, I cannot tell you the number of times that I have talked with folks that have been in violent

relationships who sit here and tell me that their spouse is the smartest, most capable person, that they're really tricky, they're going to lie and get away with all this. And then I meet them and it's like this person is just a moron. But the spouse that's been victimized has bought into it and really just seems to think this other person really is the brightest person on the planet, or whatever.

But it does make sense that -- yeah. I mean, everything you said makes a lot of sense and I can see where those kinds of people would easily slip into this kind of difficulty.

What do you see on the other side of this? When you're looking at the people that are being controlled, that are being treated like a child, how do they react to that? They don't just -- they're not happy with that, are they?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: No. I mean, there's kind of a number of different reactions. Some people will rebel and really kind of meet their partner's low expectations. So if you tell me what to do I'm far less likely to do what you want. So if you think that I'm difficult or a loser or whatever then, okay, I'll show you and I won't do anything that you want me to do.

Others will withdraw and really check out of the relationship and just kind of say that you're not treating me as a partner so I'm not going to be a partner to you.

And others will throw it back on the spouse. Like, well, you knew this was what I was like when we got married. What else do you expect? And find some way to kind of turn it around on them.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. What about -- like, you mentioned sometimes there are arguments about -- or an older spouse wanting to control the money when married to a much younger spouse, that that's a fairly common scenario that you've seen. Is it possible that the older spouse is right, that the younger spouse really is wasting money or doing crazy things and the older spouse really has a good point?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah, it can be right. And I think again it's kind of a matter of how are you delivering your message? So are you saying, "You're an idiot and you don't know how to handle money so I'm going to tell you what to do with it"? Or are you saying, "I'm really concerned about our finances. You seem to have a lot of fun with the shopping but we need to kind of reign this in and figure out

a way to work on it together"? So that you seem less controlling and less like I'm telling you what to do.

Lee Rosen: Right. You don't just grab the wallet and cut up the credit cards.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: It takes all the drama out of it. What fun is that? You experts are no fun at all.

Let me ask you, when you see a marriage where this kind of control is a problem, are there symptoms, are there behaviors that jump out at you that you don't see in other scenarios? Do you hear special kinds of complaints? I'm assuming people don't just walk in and say, "My spouse treats me like a child." But maybe they do.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Well, yeah, there are a lot of people who come in and say that they either feel controlled or that they don't feel like they're kind of an equal partner in the relationship. And the other side of it will be, "My spouse never takes care of responsibilities; I always have to do everything." So you do have people come out and say that.

But you also have people come in who just say, "We're not feeling very close anymore. I'm not feeling connected. We can't figure out what's going on. We're not having sex anymore." And so often times people will talk about kind of the lack of intimacy in the relationship, both physical and emotional, and that that sometimes can be a key towards, well, why aren't you feeling like you're in a close connected adult relationship? If you're treating me like a kid, why would I want to have sex with you? That kind of thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes a lot of sense. What do you do -- where do you start with a couple like this? Are there approaches that you typically take to help them get things straightened out?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Yeah. I think part of it is making sure that there aren't any safety issues. So if there is somebody who's being physically abusive, making sure that that's taken care of. But it's not often to that kind of a level.

So really thinking about clarifying what each person wants. Why is the other person's behavior bothersome? Why is this particular issue important to them? And then trying to help each other see where they're coming from. Is it that it's a

communication issue, the one person saying, "Sure, I'll let you do that," when that's not really what they mean? Or is it that one person is far more sensitive to hearing things delivered in a certain kind of way? And really just understanding where each other's coming from.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Do you focus more on the behavior of the person who is being treated more like a child or being controlled, or do you focus more on the behavior of that person who is doing the controlling?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I would say it depends on the issue and sometimes the week. Sometimes it can be, is one partner making reasonable requests but the other partner is not hearing about what the requests are? Are they being difficult? Are they being lazy? Or is one person making unreasonable requests and the other person needs to be able to stand up for themselves?

But also kind of keeping in mind that it's hard to be controlling if the other person doesn't allow it. And that's not to say that one person is to blame as much as the person who is being treated like the child can really instigate it just as much as the other person can. And so really being able to look at the dynamic of the relationship and see who's really kind of bringing out what and who's really pushing those buttons. And if you lay down and make yourself a rug, even nice people will walk all over you.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, you see people with every sort of issue in their marriages. I mean, you have a really broad range of types of problems that you're dealing with. And I'm wondering, is this controlling spouse thing, is that a -- where does that fall on the spectrum of easy to difficult?

Sometimes we talk about topics and I feel like bing-bang-boom, you guys could see somebody and in four or five sessions life is back on track. And other times I feel like there's just no way in the world -- and you basically acknowledge we can't fix that marriage. Way too gone. Where does this fit into the spectrum?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think it depends on where it's coming from. So is this somebody who watched their parents interact in this kind of way and they aren't even really aware of what they're doing? If that's the case then you can point it out to them, they can go, "Holy cow. I didn't even realize I was doing that. That wasn't my intention." Then I think it's an easier road.

I think if people who are -- they are the low self-esteem or they do have problems with anger management, I think that's where it can be a lot more difficult and, depending on the person, may or may not be something that's resolved.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, it sounds like it may be so complicated, there may be so many layers of difficulty that this is the way that the problems manifest themselves but it's just too much to dig your way out of.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: So this is -- I hear you that sometimes it's pretty manageable, but sometimes this is among the really tough stuff that you have to deal with. Okay.

Anything else we need to know about controlling spouses who treat their spouse like a child, or you think we've got it covered?

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: I think that keeping in mind that if you control everything that means it's all your responsibility. And who wants to have all that responsibility? That's the part that -- that's what makes marriage so useful in a sense, that you can have a partner who can share responsibilities with you. So why would you put yourself in the position of being the only one who's allowed to take care of anything?

Lee Rosen: Good argument for -- you're absolutely right. There's no payoff in being that controlling. I agree with you.

I was hoping you were going to say something that I could play back to my wife so that I wouldn't have to load the dishwasher anymore, but it doesn't sound like her -- I think she has good intentions, unfortunately, so I'll have to keep loading that thing. Although you should hear her when she tells me I loaded too much stuff in it and the dishes don't get clean. It's like, come on. I loaded it; leave me alone.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: And then it's a matter of do you want help?

Lee Rosen: That's right. I'm doing the best I can.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Would you like to have some help?

Lee Rosen: That's right. And I don't want to eat off dirty dishes anyway so --

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: Right.

Lee Rosen: -- you know, I have a vested interest.

Well, Katrina, thank you so much for joining us today. I really appreciate it.

Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: Very interesting stuff. And if you have questions about Katrina's practice, counseling, therapy services, all of that at Lepage Associates, let me give you some ideas about how you can find out more. One way would be to look at their website at LepageAssociates.com. And I'm going to put a link to it in the show notes, but let me spell it for you right now in case you'd like to look at it. It's L-e-p-a-g-e Associates.com. You can also call Katrina's office at (919) 572-0000. Easy to reach.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. Again, as I said at the outset, if you have comments we would very much love to hear from you. We love to hear your ideas about future shows and your comments on the ones that you're listening to now.

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

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