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The Marriage First Aid Kit

This is Episode number 76 of Stay Happily Married, "The Marriage First Aid Kit."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by telephone with Dr. Bryce Kaye. Bryce holds a Ph.D. in psychology in personality and has been a therapist and marriage counselor for over 35 years. Bryce owns a psychological practice in Cary, North Carolina and a second practice in Oriental, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife.

Today we're going to be talking about his brand new book *The Marriage First Aid Kit*, which is going to be available from Bascom Hill Publishing on August 25th, so just about now. Welcome to the show, Bryce. How are you doing?

Bryce Kaye: Doing good. I'm excited to be here. Thanks, Lee.

Lee Rosen: Well, now, I heard a rumor that you have -- when you were in Oriental that you live on a boat. Is that true?

Bryce Kaye: Yes, for part of my week; it's sometimes two days, sometimes four days. I've got a little office down there and that's where I like to write. And some day I actually would like to take some couples out to intervention weekends with them.

Lee Rosen: On the boat. Well, that is a beautiful area. Absolutely fantastic. I bet it's tough -- I would assume that living on a boat with your wife makes marriage at least a little harder than having, say, a 2,000 square foot home somewhere.

Bryce Kaye: Well, Lee, it's harder when we're docking; let's put it that way. Docking is the crisis time.

Lee Rosen: All the stress.

Bryce Kaye: But at other times it actually pulls you together so -- at least we find.

Lee Rosen: Well, good, good. I'm excited about your book, *The Marriage First Aid Kit*. And I know it's out any day now. Let me ask you, why did you do this? What motivated you to write the book?

Bryce Kaye: Well, I think really two motives. One was I saw such a need because there's so much poor information out there and a lot of the models don't work so well. A lot of people are still struggling trying to figure out what -- how can we help people untie these knots? And even in the late '90s I saw a study that showed that after one year couples reporting -- on the average of about 33 percent reporting that there were gains. After two years it dropped to 16.5 percent.

And although some people do quite better than that and we may have evolved from there, but still the models of teaching people how to communicate and then they get into these emotional situations and of course it's -- they can't even pull it up from memory; it's so far away.

Lee Rosen: Right. They get so caught up. Right.

Bryce Kaye: Those communication models don't work. Even the models of, okay, teach people about their histories and why they have what we all a projective identification where they try to complete themselves through their partner. It's all very esoteric and interesting and does explain a lot of why we have initial attractions but there's a whole process that comes into play. After a year or two and the old "in love/infatuation" dies out, you're into a new game.

And so nobody really was taking it from the angle that I've learned really explains a lot of what's going on because I have a -- let me just say I take it from a different angle because for a number of years I've been trying to figure this out and I've been doing detective work, going into the libraries, reading about old Soviet reflexology, psychophysiology, the new scans, trying to evolve therapy. So I'm doing stuff that not too many people are doing. It feels kind of exciting, kind of like I'm a tomb raider, you know? Raiders of the Lost Ark doing this research.

And it helped me see that these emotions change over time in ways that can be explained as reflexes that are being conditioned and grown and people don't know how to manage them. So I've evolved different kinds of treatments and, lo and behold, a lot of these couples, when they do the stuff, get better. So that tells me why essentially a lot of these dynamics really -- that are being ignored are at play.

The second reason why I did the book is because I'm getting older and I thought, god, I don't want to die with this stuff just in my head. So I've been pumping it out to the public for a number of years now. My website, MarriageFirstAid.com has been the top three for marriage problems and marriage improvement on the Google for, I don't know, years.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah, you're everywhere and people are definitely talking about your ideas. And so it sounds like -- beyond just wanting to share your thoughts on all of this and having this stuff live forever, it really does sound like you have seen that a lot of what goes on just doesn't work for people. I mean, that's unfortunate but that's kind of the reality of it.

Let me ask you this. What is it -- why do you think couples are having such a touch time staying married? Why is this divorce rate as high as it is? What's going on?

Bryce Kaye: Okay. Here's a perspective that most people don't have because most people don't really look at history in terms of how marriage has changed.

In the 1800s, if you're living on the plains of Nebraska and you are helping each other to not starve or get scalped, you got a tremendous relief from helping each other to survive. And when soldiers, males, go over and fight and protect each other and depend on each other and give each other a sense of safety from being killed, they grow love. A lot of people don't realize that a lot of what drives combat soldiers to hang together and function is actually a love for each other.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, you hear stories about people that --

Bryce Kaye: Now, what we don't know -- what most people don't know, Lee, is that we've lost that dimension that we are carrying out these responsibilities to really save each other's lives and we are no longer getting the relief of helping each other for survival. You don't get points for -- your partner doesn't get points for driving to the grocery store to buy you some chicken for dinner; you don't grow

affection from that. So we've lost a huge dimension of growing affection because we no longer are survival-oriented. That's one, okay?

Number two, you take a look at our states are changing too. You no longer cut off at 5:00, come home, get insulated with the family and focus. Now we've got media coming in. We have tethers, electronic tethers, where we work at night. We have two wage earners now, not just one. So we're being deprived of a certain emotional state with which bonding took place. We no longer are replenishing our bond with what I call attachment nurturing, okay? Not as much as we used to.

Okay. So you put those two together -- we've lost the sense of saving each other lives, if you will; and we no longer are sharing as much state in the positive where attachment really is replenished, which we'll probably get to, which is in a paratelic state as opposed to a telic state. Responsibility state is the telic state; paratelic state is in the here and now and it's enjoying the experience -- experience-focused state.

Lee Rosen: So just a -- bottom line, people live in a different world today than they did not all that long ago. And things are changing quickly. I mean, you mentioned the technology. That change has really happened very recently.

Bryce Kaye: Yeah. People are living in a different mental world.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Bryce Kaye: It's all happening upstairs in the head. And people -- one of the things is that people -- and one of the reasons why I wrote the book is people don't know how to manage the mental world in a way that grows affection as a crop.

Lee Rosen: Right. If anything it probably causes people to be further apart.

Bryce Kaye: Yes, it does.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Absolutely. Let me ask you this. And reading the book -- and you mentioned the website, MarriageFirstAid.com. You've got the first five chapters of the book up there that anybody can take a look at and get a feel for. Just fantastic that you did that. You used the term -- you talk about the idea of relationships having assassins, like people assassinating. What is that about? Explain that.

Bryce Kaye: Well, what that's about is that the dynamics that take relationships down are hidden from most people. They're not abstract. So a little bit dramatic. It's kind of like a hidden assassin that kills love. And there are a number of them. I mean, I won't go through all but if you want to --

Lee Rosen: Well, give me a quickie. What kind of things are we talking about?

Bryce Kaye: Well, for instance, hedonic inhibition, meaning if you don't do certain things to support your own identity within a relationship -- everybody's focused on how you're supposed to be giving, but if you don't prevent yourself from accumulating shame in certain ways, which we can talk about, then eventually it captures you from your unconscious and you don't even know it. And it will kill your affection. And we'll talk about that a little bit later. But a lot of these people when they are within their marital role have lost the ability to feel enjoyment.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. So you've got these -- in the book you go into it. I mean, there are quite a few of these hidden assassins that are out there lurking in your brain I guess.

Bryce Kaye: Yeah. Down there like great whites ready to suck you down.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Bryce Kaye: Attachment, neglect, conflict avoidance, enmeshment, low-level consciousness, these things that are hidden but are patterns that -- dynamics that actually -- many of them can be prevented or worked on, at least, are really what take down the reflect that we call affection.

Lee Rosen: Right. Got you. Now, another term you use is "relationship depersonalization." How does that fit into the mix?

Bryce Kaye: Well, let me give -- I'll explain that, but let me give a broader perspective on relationships first as the model I use.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Bryce Kaye: And the model is that we're not just about being connected. Sure, we get into marriage because we want to be connected and we want to belong, we want to feel loved and close. But we also want to make your own decisions, have privacy, feel our own power, stand on our own two feet, be independent. So we have a need for connection, we have a need for independence; we're a paradox. Which is okay. We also want air and water but we take them in at different times.

In a relationship, instead of being static it's very important that we be able to reverse from one state to another and experience and reinforce those needs and our identity at different times and be flexible.

But there's a third dynamic that takes it down and that is that we have an inhibition system that nobody wants to talk about. And the first chapter in my book, I call it "The Great No-No." Now, I could describe it to you, how it starts as a shame reflex that is serotonin-based and turns off the dopamine system and you get this horrific kind of experience of wanting to shrink. But then the unconscious begins to anticipate even that so you don't even get there many times; your brain anticipates not to go certain places, don't turn on certain things. And it can even result in don't turn on certain needs; don't even be aware that you have certain needs.

What happens is when your unconscious and your inhibitory system prevents you from even wanting you through this hedonic inhibition, over time you start to lose a sense of your own identity. Now, initially you'll lose attraction. This is where a lot of your affairs come in. Lee, I see of affairs involving this dynamic, okay? It's usually the under-assertive person who hides or placates. But over time the person starts not knowing what they want anymore. They lose -- because those reflexes aren't working. "I don't know what I want."

And eventually they're going to get a sensation, many of them -- and many of your listeners are going to identify with this -- going to get a sensation that they're suffocating, that they're drowning. And there's a real close association of their oxygen supply being cut off. And what comes with that is "I don't know who I am anymore." Those are the classic words. That's depersonalization, only in slow motion.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. Deep thoughts but, yeah, makes a lot of sense. Fantastic. Let me ask you this in sort of practical terms. What is the biggest mistake -- you've helped a lot of couples over the years. What do you think is the biggest mistake that you see couples making in their relationships?

Bryce Kaye: Lee, it's that couples do not discriminate and think that they have to actually be deliberate about feeding a connection. Imagine your relationship as a bucket, all right? And you want to be filling into the bucket faster than the holes in the bucket are draining it out. Well, the holes in the bucket are really the bruising that goes on that is continually conditioning inhibition into our systems, into our

unconscious. That's what I was talking about before. That happens in relationships and it's why relationships wind down if you don't do certain things. You have to be pouring into the bucket at a faster rate than it's draining out.

Well, you pour into the bucket through attachment nurturance, by actually giving your partner experiences of being important, that the world is important and their wants and needs are important because you pursue their mind, not just their body, not just because they do certain things.

So the biggest mistake is that people do not strategize to regularly pursue mind of their partner. And the reason I say this is because many relationships I work with, you can actually just tell them how to set it up in their week to book it in and get away from the laptop, get away from the children -- because when you're in a parent state you're in a responsibility state and you do not really reinforce your bond with each other. A lot of people don't know that. That's why relationship status actually goes down, one big reason, when children come in the scene because they're just trying to parent with each other and they're not replenishing that bucket.

But when you teach people, sit out two hours each week, get out of the house, you're not going to talk about anything that's going to put you in a responsibility state. You don't talk about money, child, job, any problem solving whatsoever, and you don't talk about the relationship because while you're analyzing your relationship you're in responsibility state and you're not building attachment. Instead you talk about what each one hopes for, their memories, the meaning they put into their lives, all the silly stuff that people may think about when they get up to pee in the middle of the night and they never tell anybody.

Lee Rosen: Right. And they're filling that bucket. Yep. That makes perfect sense.

Bryce Kaye: And when their framework of meaning, their personal framework of meaning, is pursued and they see the light in the other person's eyes lighting up as the other person asks questions, that person's going to feel loved. And if that's happening regularly -- two hours a week I tell people -- a lot of relationships turn around just by following that.

Now, some can't because they carry a lot of wounds from their first relationship with parents or whatever and they have a lot of shame and of course they have big holes in the bottom of the bucket. But a lot of relationships do turn around fairly quickly just by doing that.

- Lee Rosen: Right. Just putting that energy into it, filling up that bucket.
- Bryce Kaye: That's right. And that's the biggest mistake people make is that they assume that if all they do is go to the grocery store, cook, raise children together, balance the checkbook, talk about problems, that that's all they have to do. Wrong. It's kind of like a cabbage soup. It's thin gruel. You're not going to find subsistence for your relationship.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Do you ever get people that just say what they're going to do is fix their relationship by loving each other more? Does that work?
- Bryce Kaye: Yeah. But it's kind of like saying all you're going to do -- you're going to have a good crop because you're going to pull the corn stalks higher in the air.
- Lee Rosen: Right. They've got to really do what you're talking about with filling that bucket. Yeah.
- Bryce Kaye: That's right. You don't control those reflexes. You influence them and you set conditions that grow. You've got to cultivate love; you don't manufacture it.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. I'm with you 100 percent. Let me tell you this. This is episode number 76 of this show and I will tell you that of the 76 episodes probably 74 of them, maybe 73.5, when I ask somebody, "What do you do to make a marriage work?" the answer is almost always -- boils down to communication. And in your book you say that communication isn't the biggest problem.
- Bryce Kaye: Yes.
- Lee Rosen: But I will say filling the bucket does sound like a communication thing. Set me straight. What is the biggest problem?
- Bryce Kaye: Well, it involves communication. Don't get me wrong.
- Lee Rosen: Okay.
- Bryce Kaye: But the biggest problem is emotional regulation and emotional management, okay? If you go back to everybody's -- if you ask people, "In the first part of your relationship how well did you communicate?" They'll look at each other and they'll usually say, "Oh, pretty good." Okay. So people are communicating fine.

The reason why communication breaks down is because of fear. And that is fear of shame, which nobody wants to own because it's not -- it's shameful to have shame and it's shameful to admit that you are feeling hurt or unloved or that you're hurting inside and that you're afraid that you're not enough in the eyes of your partner or however it's configured.

So what takes down communication are these other emotional dynamics from below. That's why the assassin theme, okay? They're hidden.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Bryce Kaye: And so to put communication first -- "Well, it's all about communication" -- that's why people are training in communication. Then the partners get together and then when things heat up they don't communicate again. Why? Well, they learned it but they learned it in another part of their brain. And so upper brain and the limbic system from down below is sabotaging everything. So they don't -- many of them don't know how to manage emotions, grow stronger emotions, evolve emotions over time. And that's what the book is about.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. That makes a lot of sense. Now, you talk in the book about confrontation and your belief that confrontation can actually be constructive. Now, I've seen some confrontation that was about as far from constructive as you can possibly imagine.

Bryce Kaye: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: How do you deal with confrontation? Am I correct that you have been helping people learn how to improve their marriages through practicing confrontation?

Bryce Kaye: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Tell me about that. What's that all about?

Bryce Kaye: Well, there are three types of confrontation that are essential for keeping passion rolling over the years in a relationship. First is -- I'm sorry. Three types of conflict, two types of confrontation.

One is -- the conflict part is that you need to negotiate conflicting needs, otherwise you're going to depersonalize over time, which is what happens to a lot of people. That's where you get your "I don't know who I am anymore," "I'm suffocating; I'm drowning." People

who do not negotiate to maintain their own identity. So that's essential.

The second conflict is a confrontation. You've got to confront people's broken agreements. We're not all perfect. We forget. And after the fourth or fifth apology you probably want to confront your partner for a better plan for their shoddy memory.

Lee Rosen: Right. Stop apologizing. Start doing something about it.

Bryce Kaye: Yeah. Don't give me apologies. That's a sorry plan. I want a better plan. That's a confrontation, okay?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Bryce Kaye: But the third one is very important, which is that when you get boundary intrusions -- well, you all do it. We all cut corners. Instead of asking we say, "Pass the salt" or "go get the paper in the morning" and we come on to our partners sometimes a bit maternal or paternal, "Well, you should do this or you shouldn't do this." Or we interrupt what they're saying in the middle of a speech or we tell them what they're thinking and feeling, "Oh, you did that just because you're angry with me," without asking them.

And these different ways that we bruise each other very subtly are like drops in a cave that may seem insignificant but over time build a huge stalactite. And so this is what accumulates in your system because they're little injections of shame conditioning up inhibition.

Now, if you are passive -- what I find is that people who use passive defenses -- "Oh, I'm just going to ignore that. I'm too big for that," and they suck it in -- over time will have a profound effect.

Last year, 2008, CNN reported a study in Framingham, Massachusetts. Four thousand men and women were followed for 10 years and their relationship style -- their conflict style was examined and related. And what they found was that women who sucked in their responses to these little insults were four times more likely to die in 10 years.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Bryce Kaye: Yeah. So there is what I'm talking about, your inhibitory system, which is actually -- what you've got there is minefields in the unconscious which your brain dances around. So that's generating anxiety because now you have something to fear inside yourself. And that turns on the cortisol which turns off the immune system,

causes all sorts of other psychosomatic problems, four times more likely to die.

But shifting from the somatic side you have this profound effect on the relationship itself and on passion.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are you an optimist or a pessimist on marriages? Do you think most marriages can be saved if you start working on this stuff or do you think some --

Bryce Kaye: Most can be saved.

Lee Rosen: You think so?

Bryce Kaye: But I'm a realist. Not all can be saved. It's not just what the history of the relationship is because a lot of what gets layered into this relationship comes from your first relationships. And so if you've got a lot of inhibition layered in -- and I see people who have had so much inhibition their whole life that they can't even allow themselves to feel good when I'm doing trance therapy with them. They start feeling good and all of a sudden out comes an interject inside and beats them up and tells them how bad they are.

So people go into relationships with different problems. Some are smoking pot and their frontal lobes are less than three-quarter metabolism and so they can't regulate their emotions; their spouse is wondering, why can't they be responsible? Why can't they stop from going way over the top during conflict? So there are a lot of problems that people have that are -- and a lot of people don't want to work on them, so what are you going to do there?

Lee Rosen: Right. Got to be realistic in those situations.

Bryce Kaye: Got to be realistic.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. So optimistic but realistic. I think that's about as accurate as you can be on that.

Final question. Anything else we need to know about your Marriage First Aid Kit or anything else on this whole topic?

Bryce Kaye: Well, just that it's six chapters out of there, not five. There's a couple hundred responses to people online about different problems and a lot of essays. Also got another website, CaryCounseling.com, that has similar information.

I guess I could wind up with just saying change your oil every 3,000 miles and feed your relationship intimate sharing two hours a week.

Lee Rosen: And you're good to go.

Bryce Kaye: Well you also have the other side. Realizing that just as important is that you need to maintain your own separate identity without taking the head off your partner. And that's a balancing act, which means -- and I use the word "balancing." It's not about balance; that's a static model.

Balancing means that you've got to run back and forth, kind of like one of those jugglers on The Ed Sullivan Show juggling those plates. You've got to run back and forth and you've got to maintain self and then you've got to help your partner maintain and then you've got to be responsible for the relationship. So you've got to keep a lot of plates in the air. And it's tough.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is definitely a balancing act. Absolutely.

Well, Bryce, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it.

Bryce Kaye: It's been fun, Lee. Good talking to you.

Lee Rosen: Thank you also for listening, folks. I hope you've gotten something out of this. Now, let me mention this again about this website, the Marriage First Aid Kit website. It's MarriageFirstAid.com. And have I ever been able to send you to a website to get the first six chapters of a book for free? I don't think so. I think that is an incredibly generous, really wonderful thing that Bryce is doing for us. So go to MarriageFirstAid.com -- and I'll put a link in the show notes to send you right there -- and check it out because it's good stuff. Six chapters actually free right there on the website.

And the book is just now coming out. It's supposed to be out August the 25th and you'll be able to get it at Amazon.com. I will put a link to the book in the show notes as well. More information about Bryce and his practice at CaryCounseling.com; I will also put a link there. Lots of good stuff on that website.

And I think there's -- it's a no-brainer. You're here. You're worrying about your marriage. You're trying to make it better. You've got six free chapters. How can you possibly go wrong? Go read it and see what you can take away from it and then go buy the book.

Thank you so much for listening today. We are going to be back next week like we are every week. In the meantime, I love your feedback, appreciate all the e-mails and comments we get on the site. If you'd like to get up with us you can reach us by e-mail, comments@stayhappilymarried.com; you can call us on our comment line at (919) 256-3083; or you can simply leave a comment right here at StayHappilyMarried.com.

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