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Can Your Marriage Survive a Baby?

This is Stay Happily Married #95, "Can Your Marriage Survive a Baby?"

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'm glad you could be with us. Today we have as our guest Dr. Kristen Wynns. Kristen is a psychologist who has a private practice, Wynns Family Psychology, in Cary, North Carolina; and she has a Ph.D. from UNC Greensboro. She's been a psychologist for more than -- well, for quite some time. I'm not even going to get into the details of that.

Let me tell you the thing that really matters when we talk about "Can Your Marriage Survive a Baby?" She's been married 11 years. She's got a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old, so she has been through the ringer. She knows whether a marriage can survive a baby. So we're going to hear it not only from an expert, but from somebody who lives on the front lines of keeping your marriage working while you're raising kids.

It was funny, before I got her on the line -- or when I got her on the line this morning, she was dealing with the chaos of family life, had to find a quiet spot for us to --

Kristen Wynns: Yep.

Lee Rosen: -- to talk. So Kristen, welcome to the show.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: So have you got everything settled down with the kids and the husband and the house?

Kristen Wynns: For now. We'll see if the quiet lasts.

Lee Rosen: Right. If we hear a dog barking or a baby crying, we'll know it's coming from your end, not mine.

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Well, this is tough. I mean, I've been through it. I've now got a 16-year-old and a 12-year-old. I don't know if the teenage thing is harder than the baby thing, but I remember the baby thing was really very tough.

And I know it's exciting to have a baby and it's a lot of fun, but it's also a lot of work. Do you find that the people you're talking to, that having a baby was everything they hoped it would be?

Kristen Wynns: Well, I think a lot of times parents are really, really prepared for the birth itself; you know, you read all the books and take the labor classes and everyone's real excited. And you have the baby and you're surrounded by doctors and nurses and family.

It's more often two or three or four weeks later when it's kind of like in the movies when you hear the crickets chirping and you realize you're all alone. This is a 24-hour, 7 day a week gig that's never going to end. Often times it's sort of down the road that parents realize the stresses that come with a new baby and the impact it has on their relationship.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. The novelty of the first week or two has worn off and you're settling into I guess real life. What are some of the immediate sort of day-to-day things that the couple is impacted by once the baby is there and the dust has started to settle?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Well, there's really logistical and emotional things. The logistical day-to-day things are obviously both parents are likely to suffer from some sleep deprivation, at least for the first several months. A lot of times there's an increase in the chores that have to be done, obviously with diaper changes and washing more clothes and feeding the baby. A lot of times couples are struggling with financial changes as one parent has had to take a leave from work or maybe quit work altogether. A lot of times they're arguing about kind of day-to-day duties: who should get up in the middle of the night with the baby; who should change diapers?

So those are kind of the logistical things. But a lot of times couples aren't prepared for the impact it has on the marriage. A pretty well-documented finding is that couples experience a decrease in their marital satisfaction in the year or two after having a baby. And it's a pretty good percentage of couples that experience this. The numbers kind of vary, but anywhere from 40 to 70 percent of couples will experience that impact on their relationship and a lot of times there's no preparation for that. Those great parenting books that prepare you for the birth don't mention that your marriage might experience some difficult times.

Lee Rosen: Right. So I guess you're just coping with so much and it's such a big job that that just makes it tough to keep the marriage going in the way that it was going. Plus, I guess you're coming off of all that excitement of anticipating the baby and thinking this is going to be the greatest thing in the world.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I don't know if I can keep our G-rating on iTunes with this, but a friend of mine told me that the -- he said the first post-baby sex between the husband and the wife is when they pass each other in the hall at 2:00 a.m. and one of them looks at the other and says, "F you."

Kristen Wynns: That sounds about right. I mean, it's amazing the impact on the relationship. But you can't really point to one factor that affects the marriage. It's really this unique coming together of hormonal factors with the mom -- she might be irritable and depressed because of hormones. She might be stressed and frustrated because breastfeeding isn't going well, or resentful that she's the one to feed the baby and the dad just gets to sleep through the night. There's the common issue where moms hold the babies -- a lot of times they're responsible for caring for the baby during the day and at the end of the day they don't want to be touched by anything with a 10-foot pole.

So you've got a lot of unique factors that contribute to this decline in marital satisfaction. Let alone just the fact that you're both stressed and busy and often aren't making each other a priority anymore.

Lee Rosen: So you're an expert and you have been -- I guess when you had your kids -- they're, what, 4 and 6 now.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

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Lee Rosen: Were you finished with school at that point or were you still in school?

Kristen Wynns: It's funny. We planned the birth of our first daughter almost perfectly and she was born in the same month that I completed my Ph.D. program, moved back to North Carolina from internships. We just decided to do everything with a big bang and have three significant events occur in one month. So I was just finishing up with school when she was born.

Lee Rosen: And so you knew a lot of this, but you were -- how did you deal with it? Was it harder for you or was it easier because you knew what was coming?

Kristen Wynns: That's a good question. I'm not really sure if being aware of all this is the only important thing. I think you definitely have to put into place some common sense interventions to make sure you're not going down the slippery slope of having a relationship suffer more and more. So I definitely tried to do some of the simple things that you can do to keep your relationship on a front burner, but no one is immune to sleep deprivation and hormones and being stressed out. So everybody has to wrestle with those things; it's just a matter of whether you completely give into them or whether you try to counteract them with some positive things.

Lee Rosen: Right. I would think that when -- I guess most parents will go back to work. I guess you have moms staying home usually for a couple of months, maybe three months. You have other moms that just become -- that stay at home with the kids. But that's got to be a tough time too, when they're making the transition back to work. Or maybe it's a relief for some moms to get back to work.

Kristen Wynns: I hear that a lot. I think a lot of women feel a pull both ways. A lot of them are dying to get some adult interaction, while they also feel guilt and a pull towards their baby. So I think for women in particular that's a real challenging time where you're having a complicated mix of emotions.

Lee Rosen: Right. It sounds like almost -- I don't know. Especially with the first child, that you're so excited and everybody in the world perceives this as the happiest thing to ever happen to anybody, especially once they're well beyond living through it, that that's got to be a little bit of whiplash, where you go into this thinking, "Golly, this is fantastic," and then the dust does settle and all of a sudden it's not fantastic. That must make it doubly difficult.

Kristen Wynns: Right. And again, I think that's where most couples are surprised because I don't think that's common knowledge that your labor coach or your OB/Gyn is going to talk to you about, that you may be really excited when the baby's born but a few months down the road you may be experiencing depression yourself. That's a common reaction for the mom or dad to experience depression. Or for this impact on the relationship. I think a lot of people are caught off-guard and feel like there's something wrong with them when really that's more normal than sailing through it perfectly fine.

Lee Rosen: You know, most of the folks that are listening to us are pretty smart people and they've got their lives together and they're just looking for a little bit of extra input and education. And their marriages are -- they're doing the best that they can.

What I'm wondering is, when you have pretty smart people and you're hit by this, why is this so -- if the relationship is changing a little bit, why is it so hard to -- why can't folks just figure it out on their own and bing-bang-boom, get things going? What throws them off?

Kristen Wynns: I think one really common issue is that parents go into having a new baby -- or maybe even a second or third baby -- with the idea that they are going to give 110 percent to this baby; they're going to make the children be the top priority. And it all seems like a really good intention. And the problem is that a lot of parents do that to the extreme and put the marriage on a backburner and don't realize that you have to keep the marriage nurtured as well or you're not going to be as effective a parent.

So I think it's really with good intentions that parents throw all their time and energy and attention into parenting, but the problem is that often times doesn't leave anything else for your spouse unless you consciously think, "Okay. Yes, I have a new baby. Yes, I want to be a good parent. But I also need to keep my marriage thriving as well."

Lee Rosen: So your tank is kind of running on empty and you're putting whatever you've got into the child, not into the marriage.

Kristen Wynns: Right. And a lot of times this goes on for the first year or two, when it's really demanding. And a lot of times you kind of come up for air when your child is three or four and you realize, "Wow, the kids are doing pretty well but we feel like we're strangers, like there's no connection left between us."

Lee Rosen: Right. Does it get easier when you're on baby number two or baby number three because you've already been through this and you have a feeling for what's coming?

Kristen Wynns: I think the logistical stuff gets easier because you kind of feel like experts in some capacity. You feel like, "Oh, we know this deal now with getting up in the night and feeding the baby with one hand and starting a new load of laundry with the other." So I think the logistical stuff gets easier.

But obviously with each new child your time and attention's going to be divided even further. So I think that's where the problem comes in. If you've got a second or third child, again you're taking your time and attention and dividing it and you have to be even more careful about making sure there's something left over for your marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you know what's coming but you have no idea how bad it can get.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. And obviously sleep just gets less and less the more kids you add to the mix, at least for a while.

Lee Rosen: Right. Kid number three, you just forget about going to bed at all and just stay up all night. Right.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Oh, my goodness. Let me ask you this. When you're helping a couple who has recently had a baby and they just aren't feeling the same way about the relationship as they did before the baby, what's the first step you take to help them focus more on each other? How do you deal with them?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Well, it's really not anything huge and overwhelming you have to do. That's what's important to realize is it's really taking baby steps -- to make a really bad pun -- of working on your relationship each day.

So a lot of times it's as simple as just committing to each other. Hey, every day when we get the kids to sleep let's take 20 minutes to sit on the sofa, chat about our days, plan for the next day; making a date be putting on PJs and eating popcorn and watching a favorite show together; maybe getting up a few minutes before the kids and sharing a cup of coffee.

So it doesn't have to be anything huge or time-consuming; it's really just a matter of parents being creative and taking moments when they present themselves to chat, to still maintain that friendship, to still maintain that sense of connection and spending time with each other.

It's really sort of equivalent to taking vitamins every day. Well, a lot of people take vitamins to try to prevent problems and to try to stay healthy. This is sort of akin to taking relationship vitamins, where you want to do some things every day to prevent major problems from coming down the road.

Lee Rosen: Right. It sounds like to some extent, just knowing that you're normal -- that what you're experiencing is what a lot of folks experience and that -- because it's such a contrast to the giddiness of people having babies on television -- that once you realize it's like, "Gosh, this is hard and other people are having a hard time too," that just helps it to feel so much better, even though nothing really changes except your awareness of it.

Kristen Wynns: That is definitely true. And I think also a lot of times parents feel like they need to be strong and independent and be the heroes and do everything on their own. And I think for any child, whether it's your first or second or third, any little opportunities you have for help you should accept with no reservation. If you've got a friendly neighbor or grandparent who's dying to get her hands on the kids, let them. Take those opportunities for help.

If you've got a good friend who's saying they'll come over and help you do laundry -- a lot of times parents, I think particular women, try to do everything on their own because they don't want to admit this is rough. And I think that's a mistake. We need to be open that this is tough and any little opportunities for help we should accept from others, or even from our spouses.

That's one of those relationship vitamins is parents trying to offer help to each other. When they see one parent's particularly struggling that day, to offer to start dinner or offer appreciation for something they did earlier to the little things that make a difference.

Lee Rosen: So your friends and relatives all know not to offer to babysit unless they mean it, huh?

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. Because I'll jump at it before they finish the sentence. "Sure. Come on over."

Lee Rosen: That's right. "We're getting in the car. See you later." Right.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Kristen, is there anything else we should know? Are there resources out there that people should be aware of?

Kristen Wynns: There are some great books on this subject. John Gottman, who's done a ton of marriage research, has really spearheaded several projects related to this impact of a baby on a marriage and he's got a great book out there called *And Baby Makes Three: The Six-Step Plan for Preserving Marital Intimacy*. Anybody can look that up on Amazon. The author, again, is John Gottman. That's a great resource. Anything, actually, on John Gottman's, which would be easy to Google, would be great resources.

And really, just finding other parents and play groups are pretty common when you have a young child. But really trying to find a play group where you can talk to other parents and realize, "Hey, we're all having the same struggles." That helps a lot, again, with what we were talking about before with kind of normalizing the experience parents are having.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, the kind of people that listen to podcasts, they're all tech-savvy people. I've seen play groups that are organizing themselves on Meetup.com. The moms will get together there and meet up for their local area and the next thing you know, they've got the play groups gathered together. So really neat ways that I don't think existed not very long ago for putting things like that together.

And I'll put a --

Kristen Wynns: That's true. That's true.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Everything is changing every day. But I'll put a link to the Gottman book in the show notes as well so folks can find it.

Kristen Wynns: That's great.

Lee Rosen: Well, Kristen, thank you so much for sharing your advice today about helping the marriage survive with a baby. I love your sort of front lines perspective along with your expertise, so thank you so much for being here.

Kristen Wynns: Great. Thank you. And it's a pleasure.

Lee Rosen: You can find out more about Kristen's practice and her counseling services for couples, children and families, lots of good information,

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at her website, which is WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes, but let me tell you it's spelled W-y-n-n-s FamilyPsychology.com. You can also just call her office if you're interested in talking with her. She's at (919) 805-0182 in Cary, North Carolina.

She's also got a great blog about marriage and parenting. It's called Marriage and Parenting 101. It's at KristenWynns.wordpress.com and I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well at StayHappilyMarried.com.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope you'll join us again next week. We're here every week with more information about how to make your marriage work. And between now and then, if you have feedback, if you have suggestions, want to tell me what I did right and what I did wrong in this show or any show, or ideas for future shows, we love to hear from you.

We have a comment line set up at (919) 256-3083. Or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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