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Happy Mother's Day: Making Your Wife Feel Appreciated as a Mother

This is Stay Happily Married #109, "Happy Mother's Day: Making Your Wife Feel Appreciated as a Mother."

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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. Kristen Wynns. She's a licensed psychologist with a private practice, Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina.

Now, most of you probably know her. She has been on the show before. She has a master's degree and a doctorate in clinical psychology; went to UNC Greensboro, just down the road from us here in Raleigh; and she specializes in counseling for children and adolescents. She does marriage therapy, parent coaching.

She's been married for 11 years, so that's a good sign. She's got two kids; they're 4 and 6. She's well aware of everything that we're dealing with and all of the juggling that goes on for being a working mom and a wife, especially on Mother's Day. So we're going to talk about Mother's Day.

Welcome back to the show, Kristen.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Listen, Mother's Day. It's coming up. It's here in a day or two. How important is Mother's Day to most wives and mothers?

Kristen Wynns: I think Mother's Day is very important to most women. I think it's the day that theoretically most women are guaranteed a little spoiling and some recognition for all of our hard work. And for me, it's a day when I refuse to do any dishes or laundry or cook, so that's always a plus too.

Lee Rosen: Well, so do the dishes get done?

Kristen Wynns: Yes. Sure they do.

Lee Rosen: I assume your husband is filling in the gap for that.

Kristen Wynns: That's right. Actually, to be honest, he's the main dish-washer anyway, so that's not a big change for us.

Lee Rosen: Oh, so that's nothing -- okay. So look, I'll admit right off the bat, I am one of those guys that says, "She's not my mother." I have two kids. I have a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old that we seem to talk about probably way too much on this show. They're going to listen at some point and I'm going to be in big trouble. But my attitude is my wife is their mother and they're -- I have a mother; I have to deal with her and a gift and doing something special. Am I going to get in trouble with that attitude?

Kristen Wynns: Yes, you are, Lee. Well, here's the deal. When you have older kids like yours, technically you should have been kind of grooming them through the years to understand what a big deal Mother's Day is and, "This is what we do for Mom on Mother's Day." So at their ages, they should be able to have a little cash, go out and buy her a present, and you could just kind of remind them.

So with older kids it's a little different, but certainly if you have younger children that can't go out and get presents, it's very nice for the husband to buy gifts for Mom from the kids and make sure everybody makes a big deal out of it. I know that's huge, huge for women and you don't get a free pass just with the whole "she's not my mom" card. Sorry.

Lee Rosen: How does Mother's Day rate compared to, say, Valentine's Day?

Kristen Wynns: Wow. Good question. I think Mother's Day perhaps ranks higher the longer you've been married and the less that Valentine's Day is this ooey-goey romantic holiday. I think perhaps the longer you've been married, Mother's Day takes on a little more importance because that's the job you're really in the trenches doing 365 days a year.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Now, you're seeing moms, I'm guessing, a lot coming to you dealing with the trials and tribulations of everyday life, being especially a working mom today.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: When you're talking to the folks that you meet with and they're dealing with kids and marriage and a job and all that, what's the big theme? What's the big issue that you're hearing from people that are visiting with you?

Kristen Wynns: A really common theme is women feeling unappreciated for all their hard work, especially by their husbands because husbands are the ones kind of there every day seeing all the hard work. And a lot of times husbands are witness to the mom pulling off these near-superhuman feats of keeping the house clean, keeping everybody fed, doing her work, keeping a million balls up in the air. And a lot of times just even a word of appreciation or a simple gesture of appreciation from husbands don't happen.

And I know a lot of women tend to feel unappreciated and over time a little bit resentful and frustrated with not getting any appreciation or feedback for all their hard work.

Lee Rosen: Is it still -- I mean, we have that sort of stereotypical image of moms doing all the work at home -- the dishes, the laundry, all of that -- and now also working. And I wonder if it's shifted. I mean, you mentioned that you're not the primary dish-washer anymore.

Kristen Wynns: True.

Lee Rosen: Do you think that that's changing a lot at a lot of houses in America or is it still Mom sort of does the home work and the job?

Kristen Wynns: It's a good question and I do think in this day and age women certainly have the benefit -- I know I do -- where our husbands weren't raised to think you can't ever do dishes or you can't ever help out with cooking. So we certainly have the advantage that men were brought up assuming that they might help out, and that helps a lot.

However, I think just because most women are the primary caregiver for kids, I think a lot of the miscellaneous kinds of things with scheduling doctors appointments or parent-teacher conferences or all the miscellaneous things that go into keeping kids happy and the house running often fall to women.

And certainly we could do a whole other podcast on men feeling appreciated, which we might in June for Father's Day. So we could certainly take their perspective too.

But I think for women -- even with all the great strides that have been made, women often feel like there's so much on their plate and that they're not getting a lot of appreciation for all that they do.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. And I just want it on the record that I do dishes, okay?

Kristen Wynns: Great. Okay.

Lee Rosen: Even though I've screwed up on the Mother's Day thing.

Okay. So you really do feel pretty -- I mean, when I'm joking here about the "she's not my mother," you think I'm really blowing it; that I ought to go for it and do something. I mean, I have a few days here, so your advice would be don't drop the ball here.

Kristen Wynns: Yes. You do have a few days to save yourself. Maybe your wife will never listen to this podcast and figure out that she was this close to not getting anything from you.

Lee Rosen: Oh, trust me, she doesn't listen. She hears enough of me.

Kristen Wynns: You know, I do know from very informal surveys that women whose husbands say, "Well, I don't have to get you anything because you're not my mother," I know that 99.999 percent of women feel very resentful of that, especially if the husband is the only one that would make an effort on Mother's Day. And if he says, "No, we're not going to celebrate it or not get you anything," I know most women would find that pretty frustrating.

Lee Rosen: So I better go get a gift or start sleeping with one eye open. Okay. I hear you.

Now, you're talking about people feeling unappreciated, but I'm guessing -- you tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing it's really -- when you're seeing someone in your office it really has started to -- unappreciated is one thing. But by the time they come to see a professional like you, it's gotten to be a bigger deal. What emotions do you see or what problems do you see that start to come out of this feeling unappreciated?

Kristen Wynns: Right. Well, certainly women do tend to feel resentful and bitter over time, in general, if there's not a recognition of their role as a

mother or as a wife. And if they're not getting that support for their work or for what they add to the family then women a lot of times start to feel really burned out with a lack of motivation, sort of feeling, "What's the point if I'm not even going to get a simple 'thank you' for what I do or 'good job'?" They start to feel really kind of broken down and unmotivated to do the work anymore.

And of course, there are other factors that come into play that all come together by the time couples end up in our offices. But I think for a lot of women the role of mother is the most important role they have. And so a lot of times if women aren't getting validation of that role by their husbands, they find that pretty significant. And the lack of validation can be really frustrating for them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are there other things that -- aside from not recognizing Mother's Day and not saying "thank you" when Mom or wife is doing all these things around the house, are there other things that guys like me are doing and not even realizing we're doing it that are causing trouble at home?

Kristen Wynns: I think so. And certainly, even though I think "thank you" is very important -- and it's actually amazing how far just the two words can go, "thank you" -- I think other things that men might not even have on their radar, such as offering to the wife, "Hey, is there something I can take off your to-do list this week? I've got a little more time." That would go a really long way. Or offering to take the kids for a few hours on Saturday so the mom or the wife can have some down time. Those kinds of small gestures that men might not think of necessarily but that women would find as very significant, I think that would help a lot.

Also, sometimes husbands might be somewhat absorbed in their own work or what they have to do and they don't remember to just kind of come out of that cloud to take note of what the wife is doing. And to see if they're expecting her to have a dinner waiting or the house clean, that they could have a little bit more realistic expectations of what's going to get done and say, "You know what? This week let's just forget the big pile of laundry. I know you've been working hard. Let's just leave it." That kind of thing would also help.

Lee Rosen: But then what would we wear?

Kristen Wynns: Hey, just get the clothes from the big pile. That's what we do in our house when the pile of clean clothes starts to pile up; we just go out there to grab our clothes.

Lee Rosen: I got you.

Kristen Wynns: It works.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Makes sense. You know, you're making me long for Father's Day. You really are. Because this is sounding like a lot of work. But I do feel like -- I mean, I'm joking but I'm not because it is -- everybody's busy. It's just reality. We're all busy doing things and doing more is hard.

But it does sound like -- it's almost like a little bit of a -- I hate to use this word, but almost a trick, that if we do something special on Mother's Day we get really more credit for it than we would any other day. But you're giving good advice, I think. I mean, you're suggesting we do things not only on Mother's Day but we do things all year long, right? I mean, are there other things we ought to be doing?

Kristen Wynns: That's exactly right. I mean, Mother's Day is great and I'm glad we have Mother's Day and Father's Day just to make a special effort to recognize those important jobs. But certainly I think most women, if you ask them, "Would you rather have a few nice presents on Mother's Day or get support and help for your role all year round?" I think most women would vote for the latter.

And some other simple things that husbands can do -- one very important thing when you have younger kids is husbands have a very significant role in teaching the kids from a young age to thank their mom for a good dinner or for cleaning their rooms, reminding kids to offer to help Mom around the house. So dads have that nice influence, if they use it, that they can teach the kids to appreciate Mom's role. And hopefully by the time they're teenagers, they can be saying those "thank yous" and "what can I do to help" on their own. So that's one thing husbands can do.

Another thing is just simple kind of gestures. You know, we've talked a lot about saying "thank you," but also kind of the nonverbal gestures. Bringing flowers home, as cliché as that is, most women really do like that. Offering to give her a back rub while you guys are watching TV at night. Bringing home something she loves, a special candy or certain coffee drink. I mean, little small gestures, women eat those up and it really doesn't take a lot of time or expense to do those on the husband's part. So those are small things that go a long way.

Another really practical day-to-day thing is if everybody's at home kind of hanging out and the kids are doing the "Mo-om," that the

husbands can jump in there and say, "Hey, what do you need?" And if it's something the husbands can do to help, just let the mom keep doing whatever she's doing. So those are kind of day-to-day things that take a little bit of the burden off the mom but that she really, really would appreciate.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Now, do you have your husband well-trained on all of this?

Kristen Wynns: Lee, it is so hard to get a husband well-trained. I do my best. You know, he's doing the dishes, right? So we've got some really positive things going. I can't complain. He's a good husband.

Lee Rosen: One down, 99 to go. Right. I hear you .

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Well, you know, we don't want to make it easy for you guys. We want to give you a challenge. You wouldn't feel good about it if we just rolled over and did everything we were told.

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Well I will say that the attitude of "she's not my mother" requires a lot of energy for me to have to talk my way out of Mother's Day. It would be easier to get in the car right now, go to the mall, get something, and be done with this. And then I score some points. So the bottom line is you've talked me into this.

Kristen Wynns: Excellent.

Lee Rosen: So I don't know what I'm going to do. And this is the other thing that guys face. It's like, my wife is in the middle of losing weight, so all the food items are off the list. I mean, it really is a challenge to -- and we've been married, gosh, 20 years, so it's like every gift I could dream up I've already done. And you don't want to go buy the very expensive jewelry item because it's very expensive.

Kristen Wynns: That's true. But you could get really creative with her losing weight and come up with a gift that would encourage that effort, some kind of a fun class or a massage or something that would encourage that, or some kind of little cute pink hand weights. There'd be something creative you could do that would encourage her efforts there. That would get you major points to be sensitive to her efforts at getting healthy.

Lee Rosen: Right. I think you're right. And for me, I'm so in the -- I'm digging out of a hole so deep here that if I do anything at all it will come across as a grand gesture. It's like, I could get a card and it would score more points than I have for the last 10 years.

Kristen Wynns: Wow. I feel like you need to give your wife my address so she can send me a little thank you card for opening your eyes.

Lee Rosen: The last thing I want to do is give you her address. You'd have me out -- I'd be out having to do special things all year long. This would be way too much work.

Kristen, thank you so much for helping us out on the Mother's Day issue. I really appreciate it. You've been terrific today.

Kristen Wynns: Sure. I want to wish Happy Mother's Day to all the hard-working moms who are listening.

Lee Rosen: Great. Thank you. And Happy Mother's Day from me too.

You can find out a whole lot more about Kristen's practice and her counseling services for couples and children and families. She's really got two websites you ought to check out. One is WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. Also, she has a blog with a lot of terrific stuff at KristenWynns.wordpress.com. I'll put a link to both of those websites in the show notes. You can call her office at (919) 805-0182.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope you do have a great Mother's Day and I hope that you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your feedback. We've been getting some terrific input and ideas for upcoming shows, ideas for new guests, that sort of thing, so keep it coming.

You can reach us on our comment line at (919) 256-3083. You can also shot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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