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The Five Things You Should Say to Your Spouse Each Day

This is Stay Happily Married #118, "The Five Things You Should Say to Your Spouse Each Day."

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. You know, it's so easy to get caught up in the negative things in our lives and let them sabotage the good. And the same goes for relationships. Thankfully, there are things you can do to get your relationship back on a positive track.

I am here by telephone with Drs. Charles and Elizabeth Schmitz. Charley and Liz have been researching relationships for over six continents for three decades. And -- this is important -- to top that off, they've been married to each other for 43 years. They've certainly earned their title as marriage experts.

Charley is currently the dean of the College of Education at the University of Missouri in St. Louis. And Liz has put her previous education experience to work in her current position as a full-time writer and lecturer. Together they contribute to several blogs, they give lectures and interviews and have published some award-winning best-sellers.

We've got them here today to give us some insight into how to put the positivity back into our marriages with the five things you should say each and every day.

Liz, Charley, welcome to the show.

Charley Schmitz: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Liz Schmitz: We are delighted.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really excited. And I always -- you know, when I hear five things to do every day or anything, I'm jazzed about that because I want practical, useful advice that I can put to work. And so often I'll get those steps and it really does make a difference. And I already know your five things to say every day and I am confident that they will work for everybody that tries them.

Let me ask you this before we jump into the five things. What do you generally see in a marriage when negative thoughts and actions are really -- they've got a grip on the marriage; they're taking hold?

Charles Schmitz: Well, there was a famous guy from St. Louis. His name was Yogi Berra. And he had a saying. He said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it."

Well, too often marriages decide to go down the negative road instead of the positive road. And it's really this notion of negative begets negative, positive begets positive. If you want to wallow around in negative things and self-pity, that's the path that your marriage is going to take and everything goes downhill from that point forward.

So our sense is -- that we've learned from couples on six continents of the world, thousands of interviews -- is that if you want a good marriage, focus on the positive.

Elizabeth Schmitz: And when you see these marriages that are negative, they grouse about their work issues, they grouse about -- they focus on the negative problems that they're having with each other, they focus on the things that bother them about their spouse instead of focusing on what's good about their spouse.

And so what we have found from these really successful couples is their focus is completely different. And on a daily basis they focus on what's right and they do these little steps each day that just improves how they communicate with each other.

Charles Schmitz: And one thing that they never do -- and they tell us this, they warn us of this over and over in the interviews -- they never criticize their spouse in public, be it at a cocktail party or a dinner at the house with friends. They simply don't do it because it just increases

negativism and it makes people defensive and unhappy in their relationship. So they focus on never airing their dirty laundry in public in front of other people.

Lee Rosen: Well, now, that raises a question for me. I mean, personally, I'm a guy so I don't talk to anybody. But women do --

Charles Schmitz: [inaudible] you don't need them.

Lee Rosen: Right. Exactly. But women do talk to their friends. And my impression sort of hearing things secondhand from my wife is that there is a lot of husband-trashing that goes on in those private conversations. Does that not happen among these couples that are doing so well?

Elizabeth Schmitz: You hit the nail on the head. Let me tell you, having been a school principal and having been in teachers' lounges with a whole lot of women for many, many years, it is a pervasive situation in teachers' lounges.

And I can always pick out the teachers who are happy versus those who aren't with their relationships at home and their marriage. They're absolutely silent. They cannot bring themselves to criticize their husbands. And those that engage in it have some real issues that they've got to turn around; and if they don't turn around quickly, their marriages are going to be trashed, just like what they're doing to their husbands.

Lee Rosen: Wow. That's very interesting. I'm now making the list of people that I'll see divorcing one day, probably, if they don't --

Elizabeth Schmitz: Well, you know, the sad part is it really is true. Unless something intervenes, unless they instantly -- like Charley said -- take the fork in the road, go the other direction and immediately change it, which they can do.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right.

Elizabeth Schmitz: It's absolutely doable. If they do that, they've got a chance. But if they continue down that negativity, no, you will be seeing them divorce soon.

Lee Rosen: I want to ask you about breaking out of that cycle of negativity. But before I do that, there was an article in yesterday -- I think it was yesterday's -- *New York Times* about people multitasking and how it screws up your brain, which I do it constantly and I'm sure my brain is a disaster.

But I want to mention your website, SimpleThingsMatter.com, because I know a lot of folks -- when I listen to podcasts, what I want to do is browse the Web while I'm listening. So if you're curious now, kind of jumping ahead of us, go take a look at Simple Things Matter while we're chatting and you'll learn some things as we go along.

Okay. So on the cycle of negativity, this whole -- just being stuck in that place -- why is it so hard to just break out of that?

Elizabeth Schmitz: Once you start that road -- as a matter of fact, I'll tell you a quick little story that kind of illustrates it. We had a reporter come into the house. It's the only time we allowed a reporter in the house, which was interesting. She wanted to do an in-depth study, an in-depth reporting on our concepts and us as a couple, etc. And we finally figured out why.

She asked the question -- she said, "Every time I get home, it starts. He gripes. I gripe. It gets worse. Then we're yelling at each other and then it just escalates." She said, "How do I change it?"

We just said, "Stop and change it." When he says the first negative thing, you say, "Honey, you must have had a really rough day today. Let me listen." Or, "Let me help you." Or, "You know, I really like the way you were sensitive to that person at work." Immediately changing the chemistry.

And she said, "But we've been doing this for months." And Charley and I both said, "It's okay. Stop and restart. Do it tonight. Start tonight."

Charles Schmitz: Our notion of "simple things matter" is really illustrated by that very example, is that so often people think that marriage is some big complicated deal and that simple things really don't matter. But what we've found in our interviews around the world is that marriage is simple to understand. People won't do the simple things, however, required to make their marriage work.

And the third point that we always offer from our interviews is that if you do the simple things day in and day out, a successful relationship is an accumulation of having done the simple things.

So the point of it is that a simple, positive response -- a simple, positive reaction -- a hug, a kiss on the cheek when you walk in the door, something to diffuse all that pent up frustration or anger or negativity that perhaps you picked up at work or your case didn't go

well at the law firm or a kid got all over your case in the classroom today, or in my case a faculty member wakes up on the tizzy side of the bed, things of this type. Turn it around. You can do it but you have to start with the single positive step.

And that's what we cannot preach -- it sounds like preaching, but in reality it is because you can change the dynamics of the relationship by focusing on the positive. Simple things matter in love and marriage.

Lee Rosen: That's where your five things you should say every day comes into play, right? I mean, these are the things you really should be focused on. Am I getting that right?

Elizabeth Schmitz: Absolutely. And it sounds almost crazy that if you say these five things every day. But what we've found is we've taken a synopsis of the important elements that really make up the positive chemistry of these great marriages.

And let me just start with the first one. And I know it sounds crazy, but people forget to tell their spouse they love them. Those are the three most important words in a relationship, in a marriage, and they're powerful. And when you say it and you mean it, it changes how you relate to each other.

Charles Schmitz: The second one that we focus on -- and keep in mind, now, we've learned these and then found them to be true in our own relationship, which probably explains why we really have been happily married for going on 44 years.

Lee Rosen: Well, we know because the reporter came and watched.

Charles Schmitz: She's the light of my life. I pinch myself every morning when I get up. And I try to remember to tell her that every morning when I wake up, that I am so lucky to be married to you.

You know, if you want to touch the heartstrings of somebody that you really care about and that you really love, tell them that. I mean, to be reminded every day that you are a blessing to someone else, someone that you can share your life with, is an amazing and wonderful thing.

And these successfully married couples -- I don't care if they're in Beijing, China; Santiago, Chile; or St. Louis, Missouri -- they understand that they're lucky when their marriage works. It takes a lot of hard work but they are lucky to be married to someone that

they can share their life with, who loves them in return -- loves them back, as the saying goes. "I am so lucky to be married to you."

Lee Rosen: Okay. That works. So "I'm so lucky" in number two. "I love you" is number one. What's number three?

Elizabeth Schmitz: Number three is, "You look so beautiful or handsome." And I know that if you've gained a lot of weight over the last year and you're having problems with your appearance then you focus on "your hair looks great today" or "your eyes are beautiful," whatever it is to get that person really feeling good about themselves. Because that's a shared, common goal.

And what we've found is these couples that somehow we don't see in our eyes how beautiful they are, they see it in each other's eyes. They look in and see the beauty of their spouse. And telling that person that every day makes a world of difference.

Lee Rosen: That makes sense.

Charles Schmitz: Number four, kind of like this: "I really, really value your wisdom. I value your opinions." And what that means is it's this element of respect that so many unhappily married couples tell us from time to time that my spouse does not respect my opinion. They don't -- or the way they treat me shows me that they do not respect me. Or they go to the local restaurant for dinner and he's the first one to order his meal; mama, grandparents, children come last.

"I value your opinion. I value your wisdom. I respect you." Successfully married couples have this great admiration and respect for each other. They value each other as human beings. In fact, they're the most trusted advisor that they have.

And so when I have an opinion that I'm seeking from Liz and I say, "This is really important to me; I'm not sure what to do," I value her opinion because she's usually right on or she helps me explore this notion.

So to value someone else's opinion, to say to your spouse, "I value your opinion; I trust your judgment," is a very, very powerful, important thing.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Okay. Number five.

Elizabeth Schmitz: Yes. And this may be the most important because what you do here is that notion of building on strengths. You each day of your life with the one you love point out one of their strengths. It's a real

strength. "I love the way you work with the children to help them do their homework." "I love the way you treat me in the morning each day and make me a cup of coffee." "I love how you think about issues."

In other words, you're finding a real strength. Because when you build on those strengths and focus on those strengths and really make it a part of every day living and think about the strengths, pretty soon your spouse starts thinking and building on those strengths and lets those weaknesses fade away.

Charles Schmitz: And, Lee, could I just add something to that? Liz and I have been mentored over the years by colleagues at the world-renowned Gallup organization. They know how to help construct interviews and we've learned so much from them over the years as we have conducted this qualitative research around the world.

And the former CEO -- God rest his soul now -- Don Clifton always taught Liz and I that you have to soar with the strengths. That so much of what we do, whether it's in the workplace or whether it's in our home life or wherever, is that we want to focus on the negative. We want to do remediation. We want to fix something. We take that approach.

And Don said, and we have come to believe this to be true based on our interviews, is you build on positive strengths. You see a positive, you grow it, you build on it; you soar with it. That's the idea. You have the choice. You come to the fork in the road; you take the choice. You can go negative; you can go positive. You can focus on weakness or you can focus on strength.

And so what our couples have done around the world is they focus on each other's strengths. They help them grow them. They help them create new strengths. And that's how you build a good life.

Elizabeth Schmitz: And the most interesting thing is when you ask these couples, which we always do in the interviews -- first you ask them about their strengths and they go on and on and on. They can hardly stop talking.

And then you ask them, now, could you name three weaknesses of your husband or your wife? They literally can't come up with any. It's not that their husband or wife is perfect or that they don't have weaknesses; it's that they have ceased to focus on them. They don't become an issue.

Lee Rosen: Right. They don't even see them anymore. That's fascinating. Now, you have done your research not just in the United States but you've done it -- you've covered the world. Does this stuff really apply to married couples in Africa and just everywhere in -- Asia -- is this really universal?

Charles Schmitz: Here's what we've found. We have found in these interviews over nearly three decades now, we have found what we have come to call the pervasive characteristics of these successful marriages. And these themes are common themes.

That doesn't mean that there aren't cultural nuances or religious differences. That doesn't mean that some of those things don't exist. But in the successful marriage there are pervasive characteristics. The notion of two people taking individual identities, maintaining them but becoming one -- the old "two into one" concept. It takes two to tango.

About respect, that we've commented on already. About the importance and the power of touching in relationship. About the element of surprise and variety and how important that is to a relationship. Those things are pervasive characteristics and we have found these in our interviews on these five continents.

Elizabeth Schmitz: Six.

Charles Schmitz: Six continents. Yeah. We did Africa last November. And now we're working with some colleagues -- we're trying to figure out a way to work with the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation and some folks that have been stationed in Antarctica.

We're trying to figure out a way to get there because, as you probably know, there are up to 4,000 Americans -- mostly scientists but also a lot of support staff -- at McMurdo Bay and South Post Station in Antarctica. And so we're really looking forward to working that out some time in the next year that we can get down there and actually interview some people.

We're going to interview some folks out in Long Beach, California the end of July that have actually lived and worked at the South Post Station.

Elizabeth Schmitz: Together.

Charles Schmitz: Together. And so we're fascinated about that prospect.

And so our goal is all seven continents of the world. But the pervasive characteristics are present and that's what we write about in our books, in our blogs, and it's been a lot of fun. We've learned so much from these couples. We've seen so many terrific and fantastic relationships around the world. Some of them are just breathtaking.

Lee Rosen: Let me ask you a chicken and the egg question here. So you're finding that successful relationships, these five things are being said regularly, daily. And that makes sense to me because when I listen to the questions and to the comments that you're talking about, those do sound like the kinds of things people that I know that are successful in their relationships are doing and saying.

But if you already have a marriage that isn't in good shape, can adding these things to the mix really straighten out the relationship and get it back on track?

Elizabeth Schmitz: Absolutely, with one caveat. If the marriage is abusive and doesn't work because one is being damaged in that relationship, then no. If it is a relationship that can be fixed -- and most can -- then absolutely. We always leave that caveat in there because there are some relationships that should not be and should be ended. And when those hurt and those are bad relationships and someone's getting hurt or the children are getting hurt, then that's not a situation we recommend fixing.

But in most marriages, they've drifted apart. They have not figured out how to get the positivity going in their marriage. They really can do an about face and become a really great marriage. It's going from okay to good to great. And it's absolutely positive to do and very possible, if you can focus on the right things and get the marriage on the right track.

Charles Schmitz: And as you probably well know, Lee, in your business, that people that don't get it right the first time in a marriage, their odds of getting it right the second time are even worse. And if they get married again, the odds of getting it right the next time are even worse.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Charles Schmitz: So the point of it is, they're not learning these lessons and then they want to just replicate the negative, the bad, the stuff that didn't work for them. And so we say most all marriages are worth saving and can be saved, but you've got to work at it and you've got to learn these lessons of people who have gotten it right.

But some of these marriages simply are not worth saving. And when that happens -- and usually with the help of some -- with an outside consultant or person like a counselor or perhaps a lawyer friend that's helping you work through this process, whatever. When you figure out that it can't work, then it's time to move on.

But most of these relationships can be saved by simply doing these simple things, starting a pattern of positivism, moving this stuff down the road, coming to that fork in the road and taking the positive direction. But they don't all work.

And we know -- we've dealt with people that have had very abusive relationships involving alcohol and drugs or physical abuse or harm to children and this sort of thing. Those relationships for the most part are not redeemable.

But try to make it work and do your best to interject this positivism, go down this positive path, and you have a much better chance of making it work.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic advice. Absolutely makes sense. Liz and Charley, anything else we ought to know before we wrap up today?

Elizabeth Schmitz: Just that all our goal in life has been is to find these great marriages, find out what makes them tick and then be able to share it with people. So we really appreciate the time to be able to do that.

Charles Schmitz: We certainly do. Let's get the message out of hope.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing with us today. Really good advice. And I have to say that you did not disappoint on giving us the five things that we really can put to work right away. I mean, I feel like I can go home this afternoon and make sure I cover my checklist. It's like, I'm in good shape. You should --

Elizabeth Schmitz: I want you to know it is kind of a checklist when you get started. It isn't an automatic thing. You kind of have to keep a mental checklist and keep doing it and then it becomes a habit.

Lee Rosen: Absolutely. Makes perfect sense. And it definitely appeals to my brain and the way I think, so thank you so much for that.

You know, if you're listening to this you ought to go and check out the website SimpleThingsMatter.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And you should definitely check out the latest book that Liz and Charley have out, *Building a Love that Lasts*. You can find

out more about it at SimpleThingsMatter.com. They have their blog there. They have a lot of articles, resources; its' a terrific site, so go visit it.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, please keep calling and e-mailing. Your comments are very, very helpful. We like to get your feedback.

You can reach us at the comment line at (919) 256-3083 or e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We read and respond to every comment, so keep them coming.

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

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