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## Avoiding Critical Mass

*This is Stay Happily Married #146, "Avoiding Critical Mass."*

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We have a guest now who has been with us several times and she is always terrific. And I'm glad she could be back again today. Her name is Dr. Kristin Wynns.

Kristin, how are you today?

Kristin Wynns: I'm good. How are you?

Lee Rosen: Good. Now, you practice – you have a private psychological practice. And if I recall correctly, you have an office in Cary, North Carolina, is that right?

Kristin Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And what sort of things do you guys do? What's your area of specialty?

Kristin Wynns: We are a child/adolescent/family practice. So our main niche is working with kids and teenagers, as well as their parents and couples, on all the common issues that kids and teenagers struggle with, as well as the common issues that parents and couples face.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So we're talking about critical mass today. And that sounds like some sort of explosion. I mean, I watch a lot of Tom Clancy and John Grisham movies and read all the books, and so we're right in

my zone here of things blowing up. Is that kind of what we're talking about?

Kristin Wynns: That is. And that's actually – the context that many of us hear that term used is in science, referencing more nuclear reactions, the material that's required to sustain the nuclear reaction.

But I think it's actually a very helpful way of thinking about arguments between spouses and how there's a certain point where things are under control and you can still have some hope of having resolution. But when you have that critical mass and sort of have the explosion or the nuclear reaction, so to speak, there's really no coming back from it and typically nothing productive is going to come after that.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I would not think critical mass happening in your house would ever be a good thing.

Kristin Wynns: It's not pretty.

Lee Rosen: Lower the cooling rods. Something would be – I can see it, like on *24*, on that TV show, they would be doing something to stop that right then.

Kristin Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So what happens if you do – if you're headed toward critical mass in a marriage, this argument, this fight has gone to the red line and is going over the red line, what tends to happen when that point is reached?

Kristin Wynns: Right. So usually you see a lot of high emotion from one or both partners. So usually that's when people would be furious and often times you'd have yelling and screaming and interrupting and all the poor communication things.

We try to help couples avoid blaming, kitchen-sinking, bringing up everything they've ever done wrong in the last 10 years. Typically that's when you see those poor communication techniques pop up and just a lot of anger and not really any direction with the discussion anymore.

Lee Rosen: You're so funny. "Poor communication techniques." That's when we're screaming obscenities at each other.

Kristin Wynns: Yes.

Lee Rosen: And then I love your other one is – what was it? It's kitchen-sinking. I have not heard that one before but I am certainly –

Kristin Wynns: Oh, you haven't? Yeah, that's when you bring in everything, including the kitchen sink. You're bringing up what they did 10 years ago on your honeymoon and everything else that's happened in between.

Lee Rosen: Right. I've been kitchen-sinked. Yeah, I've gotten the kitchen sink dumped on my head. Yeah. I can –

Kristin Wynns: Yeah.

Lee Rosen: The problem is women keep lists; men don't do that. We need to start carrying notepads and record all the 10 years' worth of stuff.

But – okay. So it really does. I mean, all those things are going on and it's reaching – I guess it's reaching a point of no return when all of that is happening.

Kristin Wynns: Exactly. And probably any of us who have been married recognize when you've reached that point. You can recognize right away that the temperature changed, so to speak, that things are very heated, that you're in that point where you know you really need to stop but one or both of you is refusing to quit the discussion. And you can just tell that it's kind of clicked over into that other stage of past the point of no return, where it's just ugly and you're not going to get anything accomplished.

Lee Rosen: So they kind of know that they shouldn't be going there, but they just keep doing it. I mean, I guess they get stuck in some sort of a pattern or whatever where that's the way they behave toward one another. Is that what we're talking about?

Kristin Wynns: Yes. I think it becomes a bad habit for sure for some couples. And there's also a certain addictive quality to it, if you think about it. Sometimes couples really get hooked on the drama of having a big fight with a big explosion and in a way that can almost become addictive, where it doesn't feel satisfactory until someone's exploded. And you're almost pushing the other one to get to that point.

So sometimes it can take on that bad habit or sort of you get hooked on the drama of it.

Lee Rosen: Wow. That makes a lot of sense. For some reason, it meets some kind of need for them or whatever. They just really like it after all.

Which is just fascinating to me because it's so not what I would want. It just is so contrary. But you're right. I mean, I hear stories all the time of people that are doing this high-drama big huge fight thing and it just – it sounds – it's stressful to even talk about it.

Kristin Wynns: Right. But it does provide some sort of a release for some people. To be able to have that big blowup and explosion, it sort of gets everything out. And again, even though it's stressful and it's not healthy, in the moment it can feel kind of good for individuals to just let go and have that big blowup.

Lee Rosen: Well, my inclination in that kind of situation would be to just kind of walk away, wave the white flag. "Okay, I give up. I'm done with this conversation." Is that kind of approach – is sort of retreating from this – is that going to help or is that going to make things worse?

Kristin Wynns: It can often times very much help. And sometimes couples have the false notion that it's giving up or it is surrendering if you walk away. And they think, "No, we need to stick it out and really see this thing through." But as we talked about a while ago, sometimes that's not the right solution for the moment. Things are too heated.

So taking a temporary break and saying, "This is too intense right now. We're not getting anywhere. Let's take a break and come back to it later." Or if you realize after you've cooled off, there's really no point in discussing it later, that it was silly in the first place, sometimes that break can be essential to repairing the relationship or resolving an issue.

Lee Rosen: Boy, I'm just thinking about these sort of critical mass arguments. And these are the things that show up on Lifetime movies, where – and the kids are always at the top of the stairs listening as the argument escalates higher and higher and higher. I mean, we can all visualize it, even if we're not living with it at the moment.

So do you get it in your office? I mean, are you having – do people reach critical mass sitting right there in front of you?

Kristin Wynns: It happens sometimes. And obviously that's part of the benefit of being in a therapy session is in those moments ideally I can jump in there and see them headed towards that critical mass and try to coach them and remind them of, "Okay, this is the point where you guys seem heated. Let's try this." Or, "Let's switch gears for a minute." And you can kind of see it reaching that point and try to just steer it in a more productive direction.

So that's one of the benefits of being in a therapy setting is to kind of coach couples when they seem to be headed in that direction and getting them in a more productive frame of mind.

Lee Rosen: I guess you're hearing the stories and you know right off the bat if this is a couple that has these kind of explosive interactions. I'm wondering, when you have a couple like this, what are some of the things that you advise them to do? How do you help them and how do you – what is the plan? If they're coming to you, they don't want this anymore. How do they stop it?

Kristin Wynns: Well, the good news is you don't have to have any kind of sophisticated techniques. So really some simple things couples can learn to put in place when things get to that point.

And John Gottman, the very famous marriage researcher, he calls these – some of these repair attempts, which is basically one partner's attempt to heads things in the right direction. So there are a few of those that are very effective.

One is using humor. And sometimes people are good at this and sometimes people are not good. But humor can be very effective as a way of sort of relieving the tension. And sometimes couples will do something silly, like stick out their tongue at the other one, or put up their fists and act like they're going to play fight, or say something silly or in a whiny tone just to get a laugh.

So humor can be very effective if you don't take things quite so seriously and can just kind of poke fun at yourselves and say, "This is ridiculous," or do something silly. So I like that one a lot.

Another one is what we were talking about before with having a good old-fashioned timeout. You know, adults need timeout too; it's not just for our toddlers. So sometimes requesting a timeout. If you feel yourself reaching that point of no return and you know you're getting very upset, to just say, "Hey, I need five minutes to go calm down," or, "I need 30 minutes. Can we regroup after dinner and finish this discussion?"

That kind of thing, as we discussed before, can be very helpful, especially for men, who we know get more physiologically worked up during fights and they actually need that time to physically calm down.

Another one that I really like that I've used myself is having a code word. And again, this may seem cheesy but it can be quite effective to just have a code word that you and your spouse have agreed on

that means "I can't take this any more. If we talk one more minute, it's going to be ugly." It could be saying "ice cube," something that means we need to cool off; or "fireplace," which means it's getting too heated; or after you listen to this podcast you can say "critical mass" and that means we're headed there.

But if you agree in advance when you're calm and quiet that, hey, we seem to have this cycle of things escalating before we realize it. Let's both agree that when we hear this word, no matter where we are in the discussion, we'll say, okay, that means we take 30 minutes; then we'll regroup. That can be a very effective tool. And it's quick and easy to use and it doesn't require any explanation.

Lee Rosen: Right. So as a code word, I guess like "shut up, woman" wouldn't –

Kristin Wynns: I would not recommend that one. That one might keep pushing you towards critical mass.

Lee Rosen: See, that was my effort at humor to calm things down.

Kristin Wynns: Hey, there you go.

Lee Rosen: I was doing a twofer right there. Yeah.

Kristin Wynns: There you go.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. No, those do sound like good advice. Humor, I do think it's very tricky. I think you're right; I mean, it's very challenging to be – but one of the things –

I mean, I've read over and over again that people are attracted to one another because of their sense of humor. And so he or she already thinks you're kind of funny. And if you can dig in and go – if you can just kind of step out of the moment, I guess, you know you have the ability to get that person to laugh. So that does sound –

Kristin Wynns: Exactly. Right.

Lee Rosen: It's sophisticated. I mean, I think it would be really hard in the middle of all that. But I think you're right. If you can pull it off, it really would sort of break the moment in a big way.

Kristin Wynns: It does. I use that all the time in my therapy cases with couples and parents and even when we're talking about very serious matters. If I can inject some humor and sort of lighten a moment and let couples see things from a different perspective, it can really change things in a very positive direction. So it's a very, very helpful – I don't know if

you'd call it a skill, but I guess it's a skill to be able to know how to use that appropriately and use it to kind of lighten a situation.

Lee Rosen: Right. I also find it amusing when you were talking about the timeout, to just take some time away and calm down, that men need a little more time because we're physiologically so agitated.

I mean, it's not – I know you're a scientist and all, but what it really is, is you people are better at agitating us than we are at agitating you. That's all. It's not science.

Kristin Wynns: Is that it?

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. You can get to us, under our skin. Yeah, that's it. I'm just telling you.

Kristin Wynns: So all those scientists that got it down to the physiology, they're missing the point.

Lee Rosen: They are missing it.

Kristin Wynns: It's we're sophisticated at pushing your buttons, right?

Lee Rosen: They need to come right here and learn from [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). That's exactly what I'm saying.

Kristin Wynns: There you go.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. No, and I do think the idea of a code word, if you've planned it ahead of time, that really does make sense. Now, I can just imagine my code word is "groundhog day" or something, and I'm screaming, "Groundhog day, groundhog day," and my wife is looking at my like, "Why are you screaming 'groundhog day,' you idiot?"

Kristin Wynns: Or your kids, who don't know anything about the code word. "Why is Daddy chanting 'groundhog day'?"

Lee Rosen: "I think he snapped finally." Right. Yeah. And I'm assuming during the timeout you don't suggest that we run out for a drink. That's probably a bad idea.

Kristin Wynns: Well, probably. I mean, whatever helps you relax. And the main thing with timeout is I will say it can't be abused, meaning that you call the time out and then you never come back to resolve the issue; that it's always "time out, time out," and then you never come back.

So it is important if you're the one that calls the timeout to say, "Hey, let's regroup after dinner or let's talk about it after the kids are in bed." You do have to have that piece of the puzzle to finish it or it's just going to be frustrating to your partner if you're constantly removing yourself but never coming back to finish it.

Lee Rosen: Right. "I'm leaving. We'll talk in a month."

Kristin Wynns: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Obviously, these are terrific ideas for sort of cooling it off, bringing it back down from critical mass down to just percolating along and a normal discussion/maybe argument.

But obviously you're trying to help people not have to talk themselves down from it. They'd like to not be in this place in the first place or they wouldn't be coming to you. Do you have much luck – or I guess you don't think of it as luck – much success at helping them to get off this cycle?

Kristin Wynns: Yes. Definitely. Although I would say that all of us feel angry and it's actually fine to get a little heated or to get upset during a discussion. So the key point that I do have success in helping couples is to recognize how to take that anger and be able to have it present and still be able to communicate effectively and reach a point of resolution.

So the anger part is fine. We all feel that and that's a natural human emotion. The point that I try to help couples with is how do you tolerate that anger and have it present and still be able to engage in a discussion or even an argument – mild argument – with your spouse and have it stay in that productive phase and not go to the ugliness?

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, on that note, let's wrap it up. We've covered a lot of ground today and I appreciate it.

Dr. Kristin Wynns, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I really appreciate it.

Kristin Wynns: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: You have a terrific website I want to tell people about. There are two, actually. One is called [NoWimpyParenting.com](http://NoWimpyParenting.com); check that one out.



And then there's also [WynnsFamilyPsychology.com](http://WynnsFamilyPsychology.com); then you'll learn all sorts of things about Kristin's practice, the counseling services. And what I love about it is it's not just a site about her, but it's a site about you. It's got all sorts of information, resources that you can use.

You can also get a hold of Kristin's office at (919) 805-0182. And that's in Cary, North Carolina.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, gosh, we love hearing from you. Great feedback, great comments. You can reach us by calling the comment line at (919) 256-3083 and leave a voice mail there, or you can e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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