

Announcer: This is episode number 187 for Stay Happily Married: The Secret to a Happy Life. Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Have you ever wondered if there was some secret to a happy life and a blissful relationship? We have the answers you've been looking for.

We spend a large portion of our lives dating and trying to find that person that matches us perfectly, someone who we'd be willing to spend the rest of our lives with. We put so much effort into getting this process right, because it is such an important part of our life and our future. Now, Dr. Tami Kulbatski believes that a strong relationship with a significant other is the single most noteworthy contributor to our happiness and life satisfaction.

Her insight and tips will help increase the level of positivity in any relationship. Dr. Kulbatski holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and is registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario. Dr. Tami Kulbatski runs a successful private practice in Toronto, Canada. She is founder and director of the Toronto Centre for Positive Psychology.

In her private practice, Dr. Kulbatski provides psychotherapeutic treatment for a diverse range of clients, including couples, individuals, and adolescents. Through her center, Dr. Tami provides evidence-based courses, lectures, seminars, and workshops to enhance people's movement towards a greater well being and a happier, more fulfilled life.

Now, Dr. Kulbatski actually published a book recently called "The Ten Commandments for Couples." We'll have a link to that in the show notes later. Welcome to the show, Tami. I'm so glad you could join us.

Tami: Thank you for having me, Stephanie.

Stephanie: All right. The divorce rate has been hovering at the 50% mark for years now. With the odds this high, how much hope can there really be for couples for their relationship to remain happy and beat these statistics?

Tami: Well, when couples learn to focus on increasing the level of positivity in their interactions with each other, the chances for a healthy and thriving relationship improve exponentially. Remember that many of the couples that make up that 50% statistic simply lack the essential tools that are crucial for relationships to not only survive, but to actually flourish.

Stephanie: Okay. Do you see any kinds of patterns between the couples who are happy and those who aren't?

Tami: Yes, most certainly. As you mentioned before, the divorce rate continues to hover at around the 50% mark. However, most people aren't aware that a whopping 77% of those couples are ones that got married before the age of 30. In fact, people who get married in their 30s have approximately a 16% divorce rate, a chance of getting divorced, and people who get married in their 40s have about a 7% chance of getting divorced. There really is something to be said for couples waiting until they're at least somewhat older before getting married.

Now, there are also some interesting statistics about couples that live together before marriage. Apparently, common-law couples have a 50% higher risk of divorcing in their first marriage. Also, these statistics show us that only about 50% of couples that live together actually ever get married.

Now, there's a really important piece of information here that most people aren't aware of. According to the statistics, couples that live together before marriage that take premarital education courses or counseling are not at a higher risk for divorce. It turns out that attending these premarital classes or being in premarital counseling actually cuts a couple's odds of getting divorced by a third.

Stephanie: Wow. That's pretty big. I was not expecting that to be the result of such counseling. Is this just any kind of counseling or would it have to be something maybe through a church or their religious affiliation?

Tami: No, not necessarily. It would be any kind of counseling through a psychologist, somebody who is a marital counselor, whether or religious or not, or, as I said, taking some kind of an education course that focuses on premarital counseling.

Stephanie: Okay. Now, all couples pretty much get married with the intention and belief, at least for the moment, that it will last forever. Like you said, with all the statistics, that isn't the case, but there are better odds, I guess, for different age groups. What's happening with the relationships that are going downhill?

Tami: Well, we often hear couples talking about how they're working to save their relationship, but staying together is not the same as really thriving in a happy and fulfilling relationship. Many couples today are just lacking the fundamental relationship skills and the communication tools and some other really critical rules of relating to one another. For example, because the demands of life can become so overwhelming, couples often forget to prioritize essential activities like making time for intimacy and for dating each other.

Couples that lack the necessary tools to thrive in their relationships often report feeling the frustration in dealing with their significant other. Sadly, with time, frequent arguments and bouts of anger end up with couples feeling like they need to withdraw from one another.

Stephanie: These constant fights are obviously just kind of what's leading to their inevitable breakup. It's that slow, chiseling down effect.

Tami: Right.

Stephanie: You're saying that they're lacking these communication skills. What are some of the critical rules of relating to one another that people currently aren't abiding by?

Tami: Well, as a psychologist that works with many couples, I can't stress enough the importance of scheduling sex into a busy lifestyle. When I first suggest this to couples in my practice, I'll often hear comments about how it's so unromantic to schedule a time for intimacy. People sort of huff and puff. That's sort of the recurring theme. It's just not a romantic thing to do.

The truth is that when couples don't prioritize time for sex, intimacy find its way to the bottom of the to-do list. We all know that when we don't use it, we lose it. I always recommend that people book off either time on their calendar or they schedule on their smartphone an alarm to go off as a reminder for themselves and their partner to have some time for intimacy. It's also important to keep in mind that just because choosing a time for sex is not spontaneous, what you do during that time still can be spontaneous.

Now, I also mentioned earlier that couples often forget to prioritize making time for dating each other. It's imperative that couples make plans to go on dates with each other no less than once weekly. This is the rule that I have all the couples that I work with commit to.

Ideally couples should choose a specific day of the week that's going to be their date night. They need to carve it in stone. I advise couples to make any arrangements that they may need to make, like maybe arranging for a babysitter, and to do this really well in advance. Going on these regular dates with their partner is really such an essential rule in ensuring that the relationship continues to thrive.

Stephanie: You were saying you're scheduling time for intimacy, but what you're doing doesn't have to be scheduled and routine. Now, what do you see some of these couples going out and doing, or staying in and doing, that kind of doesn't feel like a routine, like every Saturday night, we're gonna have to go to dinner and spend time talking to each other?

Tami: Great question. For sure, it doesn't have to be the same thing that they're doing routinely. One of the activities that I recommend to my couples is that they each take a turn in coming up with different creative things that they can do as a couple. Definitely doesn't have to be something that involves a very elaborate or a lavish outing.

Going out for dinner on a weekly basis can be really expensive for couples, so be creative. Go for a walk together through a park. Have a picnic lunch. Maybe you can go on a date to a local coffee shop and sit and have a cup of coffee together. It really can be anything that incorporates something that either you or your partner or hopefully something that the both of you can really enjoy to do together.

Stephanie: These couples, before they're getting to the stage where they're actually making these more dedicated efforts to improving their intimacy levels, what are some of the warning signs that you're seeing from the couples that are heading down this path where, like you said, they're always arguing and it's dwindling down?

Tami: Well, there are certain patterns of communication that signal that a relationship is in trouble. Couples really need to watch out for what John Gottman says, who is a very highly respected contributor to our new book "Ten Commandments for Couples." He calls it the Four Horsemen of Divorce.

The first signal you want to watch out for is criticism. You really want to avoid criticizing your partner or calling them names. Instead, to resolve a conflict, talk about your differences and the difficulties that you're having by describing the problem and communicating how you feel and what you want.

Instead of saying something like, "You're such a slob. You left the dirty dishes in the sink again," you want to try to saying something like, "I'm so tired at the end of the day. I would really appreciate if you could please place the dirty dishes into the dishwasher." It's much easier for a person to receive that kind of request than it is to be criticized.

The second signal that you should watch out for is contempt. This includes things like mocking, insults, and eye rolling when you're with your partner or even when you're just talking about your partner when they're not around. All of these examples that I gave are really classic examples of contempt. Contempt is the worst of all of the four horsemen.

People often find that it's helpful to watch themselves in the mirror in order to make sure that they aren't sending the wrong message to their partner. Instead of contempt, what couples should try to do is to create a culture of appreciation in their relationship.

The third signal that I would recommend you look out for is defensiveness. This happens when what your partner has just said sounds to you like an attack and immediately you defend your actions. Of course, what you're doing is natural and it's protective, but it really disregards your partner's complaint. As a result, it sounds like you're attacking them. Instead of getting into the did not, did too routine, you need to take responsibility for the part of the issue that you rightfully own.

Now, the fourth signal that you need to watch out for in communication is something that we call stonewalling. Essentially, stonewalling is what happens after several cycles of the criticism, the contempt, and the defensiveness. Basically what happens is you shut down. You shut down to protect yourself and you no longer respond to your partner's complaints.

Examples here include things like leaving the room or just ignoring your partner altogether. Keep in mind that, when you're avoiding your partner's attacks in order to protect yourself, you're also avoiding the marriage. Instead, I recommend that you find a very healthy way to physiologically soothe yourself and to come back to your partner with an open mind and an open heart.

Stephanie: You said they're kind of withdrawing to themselves when there are these issues. Do you see a lot of people who are spending extra time at work, they're not minding working at overtime, or finishing that project just so they can kind of stay away from the home?

Tami: Absolutely. Although, in this case, stonewalling really refers more to in the heat of the moment. In the heat of the moment when you hear your partner say something that you just feel flooded by, just overwhelms you, rather than acknowledging what your partner said, rather than responding to it, you just completely shut down by either not responding or by physically removing yourself from the room.

Stephanie: Okay. When these couples are, like you said, fighting constantly, they're showing these four signs, how do you see these people kind of mentally trying to adapt and shift when their relationship has turned this way?

Tami: Well, oftentimes what happens is, before they turn to therapy, most couples make numerous attempts with various strategies in hopes of resolving the problems in their marriage. For example, some couples will turn to friends and to family members to act as mediators in trying to resolve the marital impasse. This is definitely not something that I recommend.

Some people throw themselves into their work in hopes that the conflict at home will just go away. This is what you were mentioning earlier. Again, this is not a good solution. Then, of course, there are individuals who look for comfort and for understanding outside of the marriage. Of course, that often results in infidelity and ultimately irreparable damage to the marriage.

Stephanie: You said looking to friends and family to mediate. Do you mean that they're pulling someone, their mother, their best friend in to kind of help translate between the two of them, or is it more you have one person going to their friend and kind of venting and their friend stepping in to try and find a solution for the two of them?

Tami: Any time you get a third party involved who's not an impartial party and somebody who's not experienced, they're not a professional individual, it can really create more problems in the marriage than you're starting out with it. You really want to make sure that you keep the resolution between yourself and your partner and, if necessary, you bring in an expert, somebody who's trained as a professional to help you work through your issues.

Stephanie: Okay. When people are going through this and the fighting has increased and things aren't looking good, what is the first thing that you would recommend these couples go and do?

Tami: When couples are having a hard time resolving their marital problems, the best advice I can give is to seek help as soon as possible. Sooner is always better than later. Sadly, in my own practice, I often see couples that just wait far too long before seeking professional help. By the time they make it into my office, one or both of them has already checked out emotionally. Seeking out marriage therapy by a psychologist or a marital counselor is really key.

I'd also like to add that picking up a couple of books by authors that are well-respected in the field of marriage therapy can really be a wonderful asset, especially when the couple is willing to read the book together.

Stephanie: Oh. That in itself can also be a bonding experience, I think.

Tami: Absolutely.

Stephanie: Now, as we said in our introduction here, you have a book called "The Ten Commandments for Couples." Is this a form of self-education that these couples could use to read together and help strengthen their marriage or their relationship?

Tami: Most definitely. Let me give you a little bit of background about this really unique book. My colleague, Dr. Jeff Zeig, and I approached 70 top experts in the field of couples counseling. What we did was we invited them to submit to us 10 rules or commandments that, in their expert opinion, are essential to a healthy relationship.

The experts chose a specific topic from within their area of expertise. They created a set of 10 commandments. Each set of commandments deals with something essential, from general areas like making your relationship last or improving communication, to more specific challenges like rekindling passion, coping with financial issues, or dealing with infertility.

Now, what makes this book unique is that each expert's opinion is formatted on one page with their biography and references on the other side of the page. Then the pages are perforated, which makes it really easy for couples to remove the

pages, to post them, to frame them, or even to give them to each other, so it's a really great tool.

In fact, I use this book in my own private practice when I work with couples. What I do is I'll have a couple choose a page that they'd like to focus on for either the day, for the week, or for the month. Then I ask them to remove the page from the book and to post it on their refrigerator door, their bathroom mirror, or on any place that they can see repeatedly throughout the day. Then these 10 commandments become a focus for the couple until they move on to the next set of commandments.

Now, the ideas in the book are presented as sound bites, so they're very, very easy to digest. As you know, in today's day and age with everyone being so pressed for time, I find that it's much easier to get couples to commit to focusing on several sound bites rather than on reading an entire book from cover to cover.

We really were very fortunate. We have an extraordinary panel of experts that contributed to this book. For example, I mentioned John Gottman earlier. He's a psychologist who's best known for his ability to observe a couple for five minutes and to predict with 91% accuracy whether that couple's marriage will end in divorce. John Gottman and his wife Julie Gottman contributed to the book a contribution entitled "Ten Commandments for a Couple's Relationship."

Then, we have the very well-known Harville Hendrix and his wife Helen LaKelly Hunt. They provided a contribution called "Ten Commandments for a Miserable Marriage or How Not to Get the Love You Want." We have Harriet Lerner who is a psychologist and the author of 11 books, including the New York Times Bestseller "The Dance of Anger." Her contribution is called "Ten Commandments for Overcoming Your Listening Disorder."

We have quite a few other very well-known people, like Helen Fisher, Sue Johnson, Daniel Amen. We've got [Phillips and Bardot 18:49], Judith Beck. Really, it's a who's who from the field of couple's therapy. Overall, we have a total of over 80 contributions because a few of our contributors submitted more than one contribution.

Stephanie: Tami, could you give us a specific example of some commandment that you've contributed to this book?

Tami: Sure, I'd love to. Let me start by saying that according to positive psychology research, gratitude is a characteristic that's most strongly correlated with happiness. When I was deciding what contributions I personally wanted to add to the book, I knew that one of the areas that I had to address was gratitude or appreciation. I have three contributions in the book. The commandments that I'll share with you are from my contribution called "Developing Appreciation in Your Relationship."

There are, of course, 10 in total, but I'll just share three with you for now. Commandment Number Take over your partner's chores on a day that he or she is overwhelmed with other responsibilities. The gift of thoughtfulness expresses and fosters appreciation.

Commandment Number Seven is learn to savor pleasurable experiences together. Take time to focus and delight in the satisfaction you experience from cuddling on the couch together, walking hand in hand in silence, or cooking a gourmet meal as a team.

Commandment Number Eight is never miss an opportunity to celebrate your partner's successes. If she just got a raise, cook her a surprise candlelit dinner. If he just completed his first marathon, present him with a bouquet of his favorite flowers.

Now, if you want other examples of these commandments, you can go to the book's website at www.TenCommandmentsForCouples.com. The book is also available on Amazon.com.

Now, Stephanie, as a special gift to your listeners, anyone that would like to receive a PDF version of my contribution, "Developing Appreciation In Your Relationship," just send me an email to info@doctortami.com with the word "Ten" in the subject line.

Stephanie: Okay. That would be perfect. We'll make sure that anyone listening or interested in this can get their PDF copy of your contributions to the "Ten Commandments for Couples."

Now, everything we do in life, we pretty much learn from mimicking others, our parents, our friends. Is it your belief that couples that are looking to improve their relationship can do this by imitating the habits of other happy couples? It can't be that easy?

Tami: Well, it's a great start. By choosing to adopt some important strategies often observed in the most successful couples, many flailing marriages can really begin to thrive. In fact, many of the strategies that are practiced by the most successful couples can be found in the "Ten Commandments for Couples" book.

Now, for another great resource on tips for healthy relationships and on how to increase just a general level of happiness in your life, you can "like" the Toronto Centre for Positive Psychology on Facebook. If you click "like," you'll get daily tips on how to increase your level of happiness and some really wonderful tips on how to enhance your relationship with your partner.

Stephanie: That's good. If couples could do three things every single day that would drastically improve their relationship, their happiness within their relationship, what would you recommend those three things be?

Tami: Well, according to the research from the field of positive psychology, a strong relationship with a significant other is the single most significant contributor to a happy and satisfied life. What researchers have identified is that in successful relationships, for every one negative exchange, there are at least five positive exchanges. We call this the five to one ratio.

The first thing I would recommend is this. If you catch yourself being critical or hurting your partner's feelings in some way, make a very conscious effort to follow up with five positive communications. This will go a very long way in helping to improve the quality of the relationship. This could be anything from giving your spouse a genuine compliment, to being affectionate, to apologizing sincerely, or to laughing together. I find that just this one piece of information can be really invaluable in getting couples back on the right track.

My second suggestion would be to practice what we call active constructive responding. Imagine for a moment your partner walks into the living room one evening and announces that he or she just got a promotion. What you want to do is to respond actively and in a constructive way. Here's how that might sound. "Wow, honey, that's wonderful. Tell me more. I want to know everything. We've got to go out and celebrate. I want to know all the details." What research proves is that enthusiastic persons enjoy longer and happier relationships. This means that being a cheerleader is actually even more important in a relationship than being a nurse.

My third suggestion actually comes right out of my "Ten Commandments" book. It's catch your partner doing something right and then tell them about it. Not only does this heighten your awareness of your partner's positive attributes, but it also highlights to your partner what they can do more of in order to foster your happiness.

Stephanie: Wow. Those are good ones. I especially liked the one about being enthusiastic because it's something to hear and respond, but it's a little different when you're supporting them in your response and showing them that you share in their happiness. I think that's a very good one.

Tami: It's very important. We don't recognize how important and impactful that can be in a relationship. I think we've all sort of been trained to just be there in difficult times, which, of course, is really, really important. The research is really pointing to the fact that being very enthusiastic and eliciting more and more information about your partner's positive experience is, as I said, even more important in fostering that really healthy and thriving relationship.

Stephanie: Tami, thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today. We really appreciate having you here. I feel like I, as well as all of our listeners, have learned a lot today.

Tami: It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Tami Kulbatski, you can visit her website at www.DoctorTami.com. To find out more about the Toronto Centre for Positive Psychology, please visit www.TCPPsy.com or you can call 416-708-7022 for an appointment. To get daily tips on increasing the level of happiness in your relationship, you can go to the Toronto Centre for Positive Psychology on Facebook and “like” their page.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you, so to comment on this or any other episode, you can always call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083 or email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and until next time, stay happily married.

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