

Lee: This is Episode 190 of Stay Happily Married: The Co-Worker Courtship.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your spouse falling for their co-worker? You know they say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but does it really? It seems the more time that we spend with someone, the more bonded with them we become. We find common interests, we form little jokes, we grow attachments, and in most circumstances that's probably a good thing. However, when you and your spouse are both working long hours away from one another, that can be troublesome for any relationship.

The time spent apart and in the company of co-workers could drive your spouse right into someone else's arms. Dr. Katy Sampson joins us today to discuss how your spouse's work schedule can affect your love life in more ways than you could have imagined. Dr. Katy Sampson is a psychologist with LePage Associates in Durham. She works with adults, children, couples and families with a wide range of issues. She's helped couples and families improve their communication, she's helped them manage conflict, and she helps them deal with major life transitions. She's a born adventurer who enjoys biking, hiking and experimenting with new and exotic foods.

Welcome to the show, Katy. I'm so glad you could join us.

Katy: Thank you for having me.

Lee: OK, office romances. Has this issue, has it always been an issue, office romance, or does it have something to do with, I don't know, the sign of the times, the unstable economy, all the extra pressure at work to increase productivity? What's the deal with that?

Katy: Yes, actually recent research actually shows that work place affairs have become more common. People are definitely spending more time away from home and in the work place, and that can really create more physical, and sometimes even emotional, distance from one's spouse. Sometimes, even when people are at home, they're pretty distracted, trying to connect with work through technology, and you can imagine the more time thinking about engaging in work that may really increase the opportunity to form those bonds with co-workers than can turn into an affair.

Lee: Right, wow, I had no idea that it was on the upswing like that. That is absolutely fascinating to me. Is an office romance, and I guess calling it an office romance almost makes it sound like it's a good thing and it's not, is anyone more susceptible to that? If you've been married a long time and your marriage is getting kind of routine and predictable, does that make you more susceptible?

Katy: People come in for couples' counseling related to infidelity issues at various points in their relationship. As you could imagine, it can seem appealing at certain points in a relationship when things seem stagnant or there's kind of the relationship becomes dominated by everyday, mundane kind of tasks like chores and talk about money and all that, and then the playfulness and the flirtations are kind of lacking as well. It can lead someone to be more vulnerable to feeling attracted to someone at work.

A new romance, of course, is much more exciting than that, but research has also shown, which I thought was interesting when I was looking at this, too, that newly married couples may be especially susceptible within the first five years as they're just kind of coming to terms with the commitment that they have just made and what it really means to be married. So, people at various stages in relationships, even when they report being happily married, can be susceptible to forming an office romance.

Lee: Wow, I never would have thought it would be as big an issue with newly married people, that's fascinating. Do you see patterns with all of this? Are there people that are more tempted by the idea of these kinds of relationships? I don't know, I'm thinking about maybe, people who hate their jobs or maybe, even people who love their jobs and want to be there all the time, or is it more the boss or is it more the employee? What's the deal with that?

Katy: Well, as far as the specific position, I'm not sure that certain people are more susceptible than others, depending on if they're a boss or middle management, but I think the work place environment plays a big role in fostering strong connections among co-workers. For example, if you work in a high intensity, high stress work environment where there's a lot of teamwork going on, you can imagine that the people have to interact more, and then sometimes that level of intensity can be mistaken for attraction and eventually become something more than that.

Lee: Right, right, one thing leads to another. When you find that couples are spending all this time at work, like so many people are today, and they get home they're exhausted. Are they too tired to really communicate properly about home life? Are their heads just so filled with work that that's all they're thinking about, all they have to talk about, and that causes a breakdown in the relationship?

Katy: Absolutely, and I think we all probably can relate to that feeling of some days coming home from work and just feeling so exhausted that we just want to completely check out and maybe not talk to anyone. Doing that sometimes is really OK, of course, but when it becomes habitual, it really can interfere with a healthy relationship, and poor communication in a marriage is really kryptonite to the relationship. Openness and sharing is key to keeping that connection there, so when people are feeling too tired to communicate, it really can negatively impact a relationship.

Lee: Right, well, if this is getting started in your marriage, if your spouse is up to no good and is cheating or thinking about cheating with a co-worker, is that something that most

of us will pick up on? Will we detect it in our spouse? Are we going to know if something like this is happening?

Katy: It's possible. Often, when people come in for couples' counseling related to these kind of issues, they suspect that something was going on a long time ago, but I just couldn't put my finger on it, just kind of an intuitive, gut feeling, something is different, and then that may eventually turn into noticing more concrete kind of behavior changes. I think we're going to talk a little bit about that, too, but I do think that oftentimes one spouse will notice subtle changes for sure.

Lee: Yeah, I hear this story a lot, and I've actually seen it in some friends, where a spouse comes home all the time and is always talking about one co-worker, "Oh, Helen did this, Helen did that," how great Helen is. Is that a sign of [inaudible 8:00] and does that sort of [inaudible 08:02] upset, do you see a lot of that?

Katy: Yeah, as you might imagine, when one spouse is constantly talking about work, calling home to say they'll be late, telling stories about the same person all the time, the other spouse is likely to begin to feel maybe suspicious, jealous possibly, or just kind of a slight sense of annoyance at first, or even disinterest. As that kind of talk continues, it's likely the other spouse may begin to feel alienated from their partner's work life and even feel kind of rejected.

Lee: Right, right, that makes sense to me. I think that's the way that I would tend to respond. If you're worried about this, if you're hearing how wonderful Helen is or Bob or whoever, and you're getting a lot of that stuff at home, are there warning signs that you really would want to watch out for, just to give you a heads up that this probably is more than just a work relationship?

Katy: Absolutely, when someone starts to seem more distant, again this [inaudible 09:15] at work, not wanting to answer questions about work or wanting to talk a lot about work, but then becoming defensive about certain questions you might ask about a given co-worker. One of the most common cues that an affair is happening is your spouse's unwillingness to share about aspects of their life during the day. So, if you're noticing that's happening, the person seems evasive, they don't want to talk about things, it may be a cue that something is going on.

Lee: Right, you're on the front lines of this, you're seeing this all the time. I can only imagine what your day is like, but when people are getting suspicious, when they worry that something is going on and they're showing up in your office, what kind of reactions are you seeing? What's going on between the spouses? What's happening?

Katy: It can be very painful and bring up a lot of complex emotions, and make it really hard to just kind of ask, flat out ask your spouse what's going on, because there's so much that's just kind of under the surface with these kinds of issues at first. Anger sometimes tends to be one of the first emotions people experience. That's one of those secondary emotions that covers over feelings of hurt, maybe feelings of betrayal, too, so that may

really be prominent in the beginning, and then also just a feeling of worry or panic setting in. That, and maybe the person trying to gain back some sense of control or possibly trying to catch their partner so they have proof.

Some of it can make you feel a little bit crazy if you feel like your spouse might be cheating. You don't know what to believe, so maybe even behaviors like trying to hack into your partner's email or checking their Facebook or text messages and things like that.

Lee: Is that a good idea? Should we, if we're suspicious, seriously it makes sense that you would want to look on Facebook and email and all of that? Is that the right thing to do?

Katy: It makes sense to become a little bit more vigilant. You might want to, when you get your monthly cell phone statement, look at is there a number that is unfamiliar to you that seems to be on there a lot, little things like that, but if you find yourself really kind of obsessively snooping and intruding on your spouse's privacy, it can become more destructive and just kind of add another layer to the chaos and pain of this kind of situation.

Lee: OK, so if breaking into their Facebook and their email is not the right thing to do, I understand, what is the right way? How do you address it? What are the things we ought to be doing?

Katy: I think the number one thing to do is to really get some support, whether that be in the form of self-help books or consulting a therapist or a relationship expert. Googling information, we all tend to do that, can do more harm than good where you read horror stories from people on the Internet. It could increase anxiety, so try to get some solid help from professionals, and another thing you can do if and when it feels appropriate, of course, talk about it. Be able to bring up your observations to your spouse in a non-accusatory way, just, "I noticed this is happening", and just try to open up the conversation.

Of course, if something is going on, the spouse may be defensive, but it's worth a try, and trying to approach it in a non-accusatory way, trying to use "I" statements, "I've observed this happening", versus, "You're not here and you're not being a good husband or wife." All of that tends to close down communication. Then also, as a last part, consider the root of where your concerns are coming from. Is there a lot of distance in your relationship, are you spending enough time together, do you need to be more flirtatious or become more playful or communicate better, to really try and heal that piece of what sometimes causes people to go outside of the relationship.

Lee: Right, right, OK, good advice. When this happens, when your spouse ends up either involved with a co-worker or, at least, it's a close call, it looks like it got very close to involvement, is recovery from that possible? I hear people all the time who say, "Look, if you have an affair, it's game over, you're out of here." Is it possible to fix the problem and get on with the marriage and have it be back to being a close and loving relationship?

Katy: Absolutely, especially if, of course, it's caught in the early stages, like you said. A close call or a close encounter is definitely easier to manage than a long term affair at work, but it definitely can be worked through with support of a therapist usually and remember, what I mentioned before, that sometimes even people in happy marriages report that they find themselves getting romantically involved with a co-worker. And so, sometimes there can be a good foundation in the marriage, but maybe there's a life transition happening and they just need to work through that. It really depends on how much the relationship has kind of fallen apart before the affair happened, but it's definitely possible to get through it.

Lee: Wow, OK, at least, some optimism there.

Katy: A ray of hope, yes.

Lee: A ray of hope, exactly. So, I'm really surprised that this co-worker relationship thing is on the upswing. You hit me with that right from the outset, and I really didn't expect that. That's fascinating. Is there anything else that we ought to know about this topic before we let you go?

Katy: Really, just that the earlier you become aware of and catch a budding office romance, the better. It's natural for ourselves sometimes to feel like the grass is greener maybe, outside of our relationship, our long-term committed relationship, but it usually doesn't work out. I think the statistic is fewer than three percent of couples who leave their partner to pursue an extra-marital affair, actually stay together, so in the end it's really not worth it most of the time. There's no shame in feeling attraction outside of a relationship, but it's just important to catch it early.

Lee: Right, three percent, well it's not going to work out anyway, so why bother. I guess that's a powerful message.

Katy: Right.

Lee: Right, don't get yourself in trouble for a three percent chance of success.

Katy: Exactly.

Lee: Well, Katy, thank you so much for talking with us today. I appreciate you being on the show.

Katy: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Katy Sampson, you can visit the LePage Associates website at lepageassociates.com. That's L-E-P-A-G-E associates.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes, or you can call their office at 919-572-0000.

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

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