

Lee: "Love at First Use." This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 207.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates and 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 marriage built on an unhealthy foundation of substance abuse and false feelings? Maybe you met your partner at a bar. Things went well and the alcohol helped to take off the nervous edge and before you knew it you were both head over heels in love. Through dating and even into marriage, substances were always around to take off the edge and increase your confidence.

It wasn't long before the euphoric feelings of the substance were so closely mixed with your feelings towards your spouse that they were nearly impossible to separate. What does this say about the strength and resiliency of these marriages? Will they come crashing down at any speed bump? What happens when the substances are gone?

To answer all of these questions we are joined by Dr. Kevin Metz. Dr. Metz earned his doctorate in clinical psychology from California School of Professional Psychology and he got his undergraduate degree from UNC Chapel Hill. Dr. Metz is in private practice, working with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina. Kevin Metz, welcome to the show.

Dr. Metz: Hi, Lee. Thank you for having me.

Lee: I'm really glad you could join us. You know a lot more about it than I do, but substance abuse is everywhere we turn. Let's dig in from the very beginning with substance abuse. What exactly is substance abuse? Where is the issue rooted? How do you draw the line between people that are normal and people that have a problem?

Dr. Metz: As you know, most people in our society use alcohol and other drugs. The discriminating point between where it becomes dependence and abuse is when it starts to inhibit daily life and when the individual continues to use despite adverse consequences.

Some of the things that we might look out for would be physical tolerance, withdrawal, unsuccessful attempts to stop, use of larger amounts of the substance than intended, continued use despite adverse consequences, and things like that. Once an individual is noticing these things and continuing to use despite these adverse consequences in their life, that's when it's something that should be addressed.

Lee: How prevalent do you think substance abuse is in the average marriage?

Dr. Metz: It's difficult to find numbers specific to marriage and substance abuse, although I do know that between 50 and 51% of adult Americans define themselves as regular drinkers. If you just extrapolate that towards the married population, we know about a little less than half of the country of marrying age is married. You can extrapolate that to quite a large percentage of our country that are married and of drinking age who are regular drinkers. That doesn't even get into other substances, marijuana and harder drugs than alcohol that can also complicate marriages.

Lee: How does this start? Are we talking about people that were relying overly on substances before they met their spouses, or is this something you're seeing where one spouse draws the other in or they get drawn in together? Where is it coming from?

Dr. Metz: I actually see it as having some bi-directionality. It actually can work both ways. I'm thinking of a couple that I've worked with in the past that actually bonded over drinking. The eventual wife was impressed that the husband was posting on Facebook that he had just drank 12 beers and it was 3:00 in the morning. She was actually attracted to that and that's actually what brought them together, which was surprising to hear in the office.

I've also worked with couples where it's not a problem at all, and then 10, 12 years into marriage relationship dysfunction ensues and the husband needs a tumbler of gin in order to have a free and fresh conversation with his wife. He comes home from work every evening and has his tumbler and that's the only way that they can really be present with each other.

Lee: That's interesting. In our culture so many people talk about meeting their spouses in a bar. That's the big singles hangout. Is that the kind of situation you see people finding themselves in where they are just connecting with these folks who eventually become their partners?

Dr. Metz: I think that's incredibly common in our society. If you think about the social gatherings of our society, most of them have some sort of drinking component to them. If you think about it, pretty much anything that people do that doesn't revolve around children has a substance component. Dancing, going to dinner, bowling or going to a baseball game or sporting events. Most people when they're golfing with their buddies will bring a cooler. Even movie theaters are now selling micro-brews. It seems like almost everything you do has a drinking component to it.

Another factor is that people like to celebrate with champagne, so every marker in life is typically associated with alcohol. Even when things are

going poorly, people drink their sorrows away, so people associate both celebration and tough times with alcohol.

In preparing for this I was trying to think about the only place where alcohol isn't a big factor, and AA meetings are pretty much the only thing I could think of.

Lee: Right. Not a lot of drinking at the AA meetings. You're right, though. It's everywhere you turn. What kind of fallout are you seeing in marriages? You're sitting down with people all day that are dealing with these issues. What is it that's happening to these folks and what sort of issues are they having in their relationships and their marriages?

Dr. Metz: It's very individual-specific so it's hard to make sweeping generalities. Having said that, what I've noticed in my practice is that people with substance abuse problems, and particularly alcohol problems, have somewhat avoidant personality styles. That creates a system in the marriage where they can avoid negative emotion or negative affect, and then that becomes a persistent pattern. At some point the system evolves and co-dependence ensues and the partner is left at some point to point out what's going on, and that takes away their one coping skill of avoidance.

At that point the whole system crashes. That's usually when you see people entering into treatment or starting to use heavier things in order to avoid the affect because either the spouse is continuously pointing it out or they have no choice but to find a way to cope with the more intense negative emotions.

Lee: I really enjoyed your story about the 12 beers. Well, I don't know if 'enjoyed' is the word I should use, but it's awfully interesting. What other scenarios do you see where the relationship is impacted by substance? What other stories have you got?

Dr. Metz: A lot of times sexual intimacy is affected by alcohol. A lot of times people might have negative body image issues or they associate sexual activity with drinking and with taking the edge off. That can build up through time and a spouse can only become comfortable having sex after a few beers or after having a bottle of wine with dinner. Then what's called state-dependent learning comes into play, where you've learn to have sex while you're drunk and enjoying it soberly is anxiety-producing and challenging.

The husband might pull away at that point. The wife tries to initiate in the afternoon, for instance, and then the wife feels rejected, that it's a rejection of her, when it's really just an expression of the husband not being comfortable having sex when not drinking. So there can be a misperception there. That's something that I've noticed pretty consistently.

Also, people become much more emotionally expressive while drinking. They have a tendency to bottle things inside during their sober life and then spew it out in inappropriate ways as they're drinking. They don't learn how to appropriately express themselves and only feel comfortable doing it when drinking so there's a real lack of appropriate calm and measured conversation. The only time important conversations happen is when people have been drinking, and it just escalates really quickly and can really inhibit communication as well, Lee.

Lee: You used the phrase that people are more 'emotionally expressive' after drinking. I totally see where you're coming from on that. I think some people conclude that the only way they can have fun, that they can really be emotionally expressive, is to be on some sort of substance. How is it that people get to that point where that's the way they look at their lives?

Dr. Metz: I think there are a few issues at play. There's a Latin phrase, "in vino veritas," in wine is truth. Some people have the idea that true selves truly emerge when drinking, which I would challenge. I think the true self involves a complex interplay between the emotions and physical cues and intuition. People that are drinking sometimes don't have contact with all that. There might be less of a filter when people have been drinking but I don't think that necessarily encompasses the true self.

That's one aspect. There is also the aspect that you mentioned of people associating drinking or other substances with fun. I think that's also a huge factor in this. A primary association that starts between fun and alcohol. It becomes a belief that fun time equals alcohol time and vice versa, and whenever alcohol is around that means, "All right, it's time to have fun." Whenever there's a situation in which fun might occur, people notice an impulse to drink, or conversely, sobriety becomes associated with a lack of having fun.

I think this is the real danger here where if they're not drinking, people think, "I'm not really going to be able to enjoy myself because I'm not drinking," so they don't have the intention to enjoy themselves. They place great importance on the time they are drinking because they're trying to fit all their fun in the week into that time period, so that time period gets over-expanded. Then there's pressure to really enjoy yourself, and if you get in a small tiff with your spouse at that point it becomes expanded and you can see they're going to associate it with that.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. Let me ask you this. These relationships where substance has become such a big part of the relationship, where it really becomes the center of the relationship, how long can that last? Can these marriages really continue for any significant length of time?

Dr. Metz: I actually think they can, Lee. I don't know how happily they continue, but I do think a system emerges and roles get settled on which are based around this drinking. If one person has a drinking problem the other person might start taking a very large caretaking role with that person, and that works for them in a way because they're getting attention from their friends as being so sympathetic and it works for both people.

There's a system of codependence which emerges. Homeostasis sets in and it works. That can last for years and years. It can be easy to just allow that to happen. Usually it requires some sort of crisis, either someone really pointing the finger at the user, perhaps the spouse, or some sort of job loss or fights with children or things like that. Usually it can require a crisis if people are mindlessly drinking and affecting their marriage.

Lee: What are the short term and long term effects of all this? It sounds like these folks may be able to stay together. They may not be happy, but what do you see happening to the nature of the relationship between them over the long haul?

Dr. Metz: I think there are pretty dire consequences. The most important one is just a lack of the feeling of closeness, especially when sober. Similar to the concept of putting in all of the fun of the week when drinking, that can happen with closeness or sexual intimacy as well. People can mindlessly go through their lives as cohabitants throughout most of the week and then on Friday night when they've had a bottle of wine with dinner and go out to the club for a couple more drinks afterwards, they can get all their emotional needs met at that time. But then what danger does that serve to the rest of the week?

A lack of emotional closeness is the biggest one, I'd say, and then the lack of emotional expression that we were talking about earlier. Then, obviously, there's the lack of inhibitions that come with alcohol. There can be people sometimes acting in ways they're not especially proud of. There might be affairs or extramarital flirtations, or they might get in fights. There are also some obvious health problems associated with drinking and memory problems, and those can affect your relationship as well.

Parenting can become a challenge when either or both of the parents have a drinking problem. If one individual has a drinking problem, it can be left to the other to do a lot of parenting. That sets up a whole unhealthy dynamic in the family. There can also be some difficulties communicating within the relationship where one spouse cannot be sure when to approach his wife. He's not sure how drunk she is, so would now be an appropriate time to have a conversation with her or should he put it off? That pattern can continue to emerge.

Lee: Right. Gosh, complicated. When you have a spouse who finally realizes, "Hey, this is a problem," let's say maybe it's an alcohol problem, do they generally see it as a marital issue affecting both of the spouses? How do they look at it?

Dr. Metz: I think most people consider it a personal issue. I would say particularly males consider it as something that I have to deal with. I think there are some societally-prescribed gender roles that come into play here where males are meant to be the strong ones that take care of things themselves and never ask for help and it can be seen as a weakness to ask for help. So particularly with males, it's seen as a personal issue.

Professionals don't see it as a personal issue at all. I've alluded a few times to the family system that gets created when one or both people have a drinking problem. There's actually this new approach that came out at the beginning of the millennium, around 2003, called the Family Disease Approach and they consider alcoholism an illness not only of the user but also the entire family system, and all the other family members are usually seen as codependent. They'll usually engage in family therapy. Even if everyone else is functioning perfectly, they'll see what role the entire family has.

Lee: That sounds like a smart approach. I almost feel like a lot of these relationships are so built around the substance abuse that it would be hard for them to survive without that. It becomes a central component of the marriage. Can they survive if the spouses walk away from the substances?

Dr. Metz: They can. It usually requires a lot of very honest and open communication, and typically a renegotiation of the roles within the marriage and within the family. These roles become so entrenched that they will shift once the person is able to be more present with the family and to take a more active role in their life, so they will invariably shift.

If that doesn't get consciously negotiated, there can be some problems where maybe some expectations are placed on people that they're not ready for or that they're not aware of. It does require a verbal communication and to be very open about it with each other throughout the process.

Lee: This sounds like a really complicated problem for a professional like you to sort out. You're dealing with the substance issue and then you're dealing with the relationship issues. When a couple comes to you and you're working with them, how do you attack the problem? What are you teaching them and how are you helping them? Give us a feel for what the options are.

Dr. Metz: You're right, it is very complex and there's this system of bi-directionality. The substance abuse or use leads to relational dysfunction and that can either be through arguments about past usage or nagging behavior or caretaking. Through those mechanisms, substance abuse can lead to relational dysfunction and then that leads to lack of caring behaviors and poor communication and poor problem-solving, which then leads to more substance usage.

It's a cycle that can become very deeply entrenched. It's also promising because at each point there is an intervention point. You can choose where to intervene and then have faith that that will impact the entire cycle.

Lee: A lot of people are listening to this program today. Given the prevalence of substance issues, we know that a lot of folks listening to this are dealing with this, and they wouldn't be listening, I imagine, if they weren't interested in working this out. What are your final words of wisdom? What's your last bit of advice for folks that are really in a pretty desperate situation and want to try and get things on track?

Dr. Metz: I would say that I'm very hopeful with people, first of all, that are listening to this that, like you said, do realize that something about this topic is resonating with them and they realize that there may be a problem. That's a very hopeful piece.

There's also a fantastic array of help out there. Everyone knows about AA. There are also a lot of AA alternative programs. Smart Recovery is one in the area that's not as religiously oriented. There's a vast support network out there. Individual therapy can be very helpful for people or family therapy if they think that that's appropriate. Sometimes inpatient treatment is necessary. Like we've been talking about, this is a very, very complex issue. I would recommend getting some sort of professional guidance or professional help at some point.

I also just want to put a cautionary tale out there as to the dangers of going cold turkey. If you've been drinking for years and years, it can be easy to not ask for help. Going cold turkey should at least be done under the supervision of a physician, if not receiving any psychological treatment, because there can be some very adverse negative health consequences. I would recommend having the courage to ask for some help.

Lee: Great advice. These are serious issues and I really appreciate your insight on this. Kevin, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Dr. Metz: Of course. Thank you for having me.

Lee: For more information about Dr. Kevin Metz and his practice at Lepage Associates, you can visit the website at LepageAssociates.com. I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes. It's spelled L-E-P-A-G-E Associates.com. You can also reach their offices at 919-572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you'll join us again next week. In the meantime, we really appreciate your feedback, your suggestions, your criticisms, your ideas for future episodes, and your suggestions for guests. You can reach us in a couple of different ways. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083 and we also receive email at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com.

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