

Stephanie: This is Stay Happily Married Episode 215.

Announcer: 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. Is there any truth behind the most popular and cliché of marriage myths? When engagement news is broken to friends and family, advice from the sudden love experts comes flooding in. It's as if we're back in school and everyone wants us to learn from their past experiences. Old adages come out of the woodworks to warn us of the possible dangers that are doomed to occur down the road. How can we determine true from false? What research is out there to disprove or enforce these marriage myths? Our guest today breaks down five of the most popular marriage myths and informs listeners of the new rules to go by when dealing with their problems.

Dr. Kristen Wynns is a child and adolescent psychologist who owns an adolescent specialty practice in Cary, North Carolina, called Wynns Family Psychology. Dr. Wynns and her staff provide therapy and testing services for children, teens and parents. Dr. Wynns is also founder of a parenting website called NoWimpyParenting.com with services available to help parents struggling with behavior and discipline problems at home. Dr. Wynns keeps her skills in marriage psychology tuned at home with her husband of 13 years.

Welcome back to the show, Kristen, I'm glad you could join us. When I hear the term myth, I think it's something that's not true or, at least, it hasn't been proven true yet. It's a story that's been passed around, that's what I think of when I hear myth. Now are there any marriage myths that are actually true?

Kristen: There are, however, as we're going to see today, we're going to get five of the most common marriage myths, and we're going to analyze whether they're fact or fiction, so to speak. We'll see that there's oftentimes an element of truth, but that much of it is exaggerated or inaccurate. We'll go through and analyze each one and then talk about the new rule or the more accurate way to think about each one.

Stephanie: OK. Well, I'm excited to hear what these would be, so I think we'll start with that I would consider probably the most popular marriage myth. That would be "never go to bed angry." I think anyone who's ever been married or is having trouble in their relationship has heard this from some friend or some family member. This one sounds like it's hitting the nail on the head. Is this one based on fact or fiction?

Kristen: It does sound like very good advice just on the outset of it, but if you analyze it I think the idea behind it is you think that you don't want to let bad feelings or anger fester, and if you do then one day someone is just going to explode over a toilet seat being left up or the toothpaste cap. So while there's a certain truth to that, that we don't want to sweep things under the carpet, most couples don't solve problems well when they're angry. John Gottman, one of the most well-known marriage researchers, says that for

many couples they try to solve problems in the heat of the moment. It's not going to go very well. He talks about this experience called "flooding" where we are literally flooded with a physiological response when we are angry. It has our hearts pounding, and it makes us have trouble thinking straight. When we're flooded like that, it's actually not a great time to solve problems or to talk about things, even if it is bedtime.

Stephanie: It's just that we want to win the fight. We don't care what it's about, we want to win it, because we're in the heat of battle. [laughs]

Kristen: Yes, exactly.

Stephanie: So what would be the new rule, or your new take on the myth of never going to bed angry?

Kristen: Right, so the new rule is that it is OK to sleep on it. That's other advice that our grandparents probably would have given us, that sometimes you just need to sleep on it. In the morning, when you're well rested and you've had time to sort of let your brain process things as you sleep, you're going to be much more energetic and adept at solving problems. So sometimes to just put it aside for the night and say hey, we're both upset, we're both tired, let's regroup tomorrow after work or regroup on the weekend when we have our couple's meeting, then you're going to be a lot more set up for success.

Again, Gottman is a big fan of forcing yourself to have a kiss goodnight even if you're mad, and sometimes that's hard to do if you're still upset. But he says to aim for six seconds, which might seem like a long time if you're mad at your spouse. But I do think his advice to sometimes say, hey, let's just kiss, go to bed, in the morning it'll look better. Or to set aside a weekly check-in to have a State of Our Union, so to speak, meeting to talk about the marriage and talk about problems then. Then your couples are going to be excited to see oftentimes how much better they can communicate and solve the issue.

Stephanie: It is funny when you think about all these cliches that get passed down to us, we do hear that 'never go to bed angry' but I know growing up that any time I had any problem or I was ever mad at anyone, you always have a parent standing next to you saying, "Calm down, don't worry about it, just sleep on it."

Kristen: Right.

Stephanie: So we're getting negating advice here.

Kristen: It is. When it comes to marriage, to err on the side of sleeping on it is oftentimes the way to go, for sure.

Stephanie: And what if you end up having, actually, a very combative spouse who thinks maybe, you're trying to be dismissive of an issue because you want to go to sleep and you want to take that time to rest and think about the issue?

Kristen: That's when it's really important for couples to set aside a time to pick it back up again, so one spouse doesn't feel like you're just avoiding the issue. So it's really important to say, "Hey, let's regroup and talk about this at X day and time." That way it gives the one spouse hope that you're not brushing the problem under the carpet, that you're simply putting it aside for the moment until you're better equipped to tackle it.

Stephanie: Now, that myth dealt with how to handle common marital issues like arguments, but what about myths that predict the ultimate outcome of marriage such as, "One day, the two of you will just realize that you've grown apart and fallen out of love?"

Kristen: Yes, that's a very common one, especially these days where we have the two-month marriages that fall apart with celebrities, or even people that we know say, "Well, we just kind of lost that in-love feeling and realized that we were different people and realized we couldn't stay together." That myth is really not accurate because research shows that many of the happiest couples don't have a lot in common and they might have very different personalities, and that's why all the studies on couples who get together through matchmaking sites where they try to match people up with similar interests and personalities -- those couples typically don't have any higher chances of staying together than a couple who met the old-fashioned way. So that myth is somewhat distorted because the idea behind it, that change means the demise of the marriage or that those in-love feelings, when they fade, that there's nothing you can do about it -- that's actually not accurate.

Stephanie: OK, so, what would the new rule be on realizing that you've grown up and fallen apart?

Kristen: So the new rule would be for couples to recognize that while feelings are important, a long-term marriage isn't just running on feelings. It's working because both spouses are working very hard at it. All couples are going to have times feeling like they aren't in love and like they want to scratch each others' eyes out. And those couples, all couples, have to realize that's a natural course of marriage and that they know they've got to sort of wade through the bad times and wait for the good feelings to come back, because they always do, even if they're not the same as when you first fell in love.

Successful couples have worked through hundreds of disagreements, problems, parenting problems, financial problems, maybe even significant issues like an affair or a major issue with abuse, for example, or verbal abuse. Those couples survived because they know that they're a team and that they're going to come together no matter what and do the hard work even when those feelings aren't there to make you feel like you're in love and lovey-dovey.

Stephanie: Right. So if we move onto marriage myth here, number three, it's a more positive marriage myth. What about "Love conquers all?"

Kristen: Yes, this is a very common myth that we hear. And it's somewhat similar to myth number two where there's this idea out there, if you watch the Bachelorette or

Bachelor -- I'm not saying that I do, but I might -- then you actually hear this philosophy a lot. There's a lot of talk about, "Well, if we just love each other and we can just find The One then we're just going to be together no matter what and that will carry us through." And while that's very romantic and ideal, that's not exactly the way successful marriages work. So if a couple has love, that is a great foundation and a necessary foundation for a happy relationship. But love alone does not conquer all of the problems that come up in a marriage. There's much more that goes into it, and if you analyze couples who divorce and who stay together, oftentimes they're both still having the love there. The difference between the couples is the one couple has said they're going to do the work to make their relationship successful, and the other couple still has that love feeling but they're sort of giving over to the problems and not willing to go that extra mile.

Stephanie: Right. It seems very hopeful that love could conquer all, but it doesn't seem to fit into the realistic expectations of everything that couples do have to go through today. So what would your new rule on "Love conquers all" be?

Kristen: A good new rule and a new spin is, in addition to the hard work we're talking about it's really important for couples to have shared and individual life goals. So sometimes when you've been married for a while, you lose sight of your marital vision, so to speak, or your mission statement. Sometimes you forget, "Hey, what is it we're working towards? What are our goals for ourselves and for our family, for our kids" So, it's really important to have that underlying united front when it comes to your goals as a couple. And it's also really important for each individual to still have his or her life goals because there are all kinds of studies that talk about one of the most important things people need is a sense of meaning and direction in their lives, and that goes for marriage, too.

Each individual needs to have their own personal goals and sense of fulfillment and that they bring that into the marriage, and then when they're together they have their satisfaction and their meaning in life individually, and then their shared goals. That kind of bond is very powerful, and oftentimes it can be as powerful as the love feeling that we've been talking about.

Stephanie: So, so far it seems that we're able to turn the more negative sounding myths into something that's a more positive fact and vice versa for things that we thought were positive. I guess, to be realistic, it's what people really need to make their marriages work and to make them stronger. So what would you say about the myth of "You hurt the ones you love most?" Is this the truth? Wouldn't we want to really spare the people that in our lives and that we love any kind of pain?

Kristen: You would think so, but unfortunately this myth is often true. This one is oftentimes fact, and it is unfortunate. We often treat our spouses much more rudely and disrespectfully than we do our co-workers or our friends or even strangers in the checkout line. It seems that we often feel safe and comfortable with our spouse, and that can translate to bad behavior if we come home and we see each other and we're tired and frustrated, then we might use a harsh tone or interrupt our spouse or call them names or

get mad and hang up the phone, and we might behave in ways that we would never do. Again, we would be embarrassed to treat a co-worker or a friend at work that way or somebody in the grocery store, but unfortunately it becomes almost normal and accepted to have that behavior with our spouses. And, of course, we all know that can become even more extreme where spouses can really be inappropriate and use abusive language or be emotionally abusive, and that's, of course, even more concerning when the hurt is translated to that level.

Stephanie: Yes, we tend to take them for granted once they're in our lives and we don't feel the need to be as formal or as conscious of what we're actually saying or asking of them. So what would you have the new rule be for this myth of "You hurt the ones you love the most?"

Kristen: This one is easier said than done. It really is a matter of having a goal for yourself that you're going to treat your spouse better than anyone else in your life. That he or she is the most important person besides your kids, if you have kids, and that your goal should be to save your very best you for your spouse. So even if you've had a long day, even if the kids are driving you crazy, even if you're stressed out, the goal would be to look at your spouse with fresh eyes each time you see him or her, to force yourself and make yourself use a kind and loving tone, to be patient, to hug and kiss them even if you don't feel like it, have some positive chit-chat time before you launch into the to-do list or all the problems of the day. Just imagining that your spouse is... Trying to look at them through the lens of, hey, pretend like this is a new friend that I really want to connect with. Or pretend like we're dating and I really want to impress him with how lovely my personality is. If you really look at your spouse that way and have a conscious effort to do it, that can go a long way.

Stephanie: So now we're down to a very important myth and it's our last one here. One, I think, that can probably make or break a relationship and you'll have to let me know if this is actually true. What about the myth for "Forgive and forget?"

Kristen: This one actually has some parts that are fact and some parts that are myth. I think forgiveness is one of those critical issues in any relationship, and oftentimes in a marriage the person who has been offended or who has been hurt, they have a really hard time of letting that go. It sort of feels good to hold onto it and to be mad, and sometimes couples will collect the offenses and have the [inaudible 17:36] list or the kitchen sinking, where they're just waiting for the chance to whip out the list of offenses and remember when you did this or remember when you did that? And oftentimes that inability or unwillingness to forget does cause problems. So that part is true, that we do need to forget the small offenses. But the part that's not exactly accurate is it's unrealistic to think that you're going to forget all of the major fights you've had. Or if there are really serious things that happened in the marriage, it's unrealistic to think about forgetting those. But, as we'll talk about in a minute with the new rule, then the goal would be to find a way to move on and to not get stuck on the offenses and let those trip you up time and time again.

Stephanie: Right, so there's the fine line between letting the little things go, or the things that don't need to be drug out, and becoming a road that people can just stomp all over. So what would you say is the new rule for this myth?

Kristen: So then the new rule would be that certainly with the little things that happen with our spouses, we have to let those go. And as much as possible, we need to just flush them from our memory banks as much as possible. And that does help from that phenomenon where all of a sudden you're fighting about not taking the trash out and people are screaming and yelling and threatening to leave the other one, and it seems like a small issue but because one or both spouses has refused to flush the small offenses of the day. So the new rule would certainly be to choose to let go of the offenses, to choose to forgive the other one even if it's unpleasant. It's really significant of the one to forgive in the long run because if you're holding onto those things, it's not good for your mental health or your mood.

I'm a big fan of something that's called advanced forgiveness. And this is kind of a fun thing for spouses to experiment with. This is where one person makes a conscious decision that the next time your spouse offends you or upsets you, that you're going to forgive him or her. So then when it happens, you've already kind of made that decision in your mind. You remember this and you just say, "OK, I forgive you, let's move on." And that's actually a cool thing for spouses to experiment with because it's a proactive approach to dealing with problems and taking the high road, so to speak, to say, "Hey, here's a free pass I've already got saved up in my mind. The next time my spouse upsets me I'm just going to use the free pass and move on with things."

Stephanie: Interesting. Advanced forgiveness, I'm not sure I've ever heard of that. I didn't know it could be, I guess, you really do need both people working together on that one though, because if you have someone constantly doing it on their own, just saying, "Oh, I forgive you, I forgive you," they're going to try and push those limits, I can imagine.

Kristen: That's right. It works best if both couples are very motivated to try to work on things and to try not to get tripped up with saving up the guilt card to wave in front of the other one any chance they get.

Stephanie: Well, Kristen, is there anything else that we should know about the facts and fiction of marriage before we let you go today?

Kristen: I think we've hit on the major points. I guess, if I were to come up with a common theme among all of the myths is that myths and cliches, they're oftentimes over simplified, and anybody who's been married for longer than a week knows that these cliches and myths are over simplified and that the real life work of having a successful marriage is always more complicated than how it's portrayed [inaudible 21:48 to 21:53]. The bottom line is kind of knowing that it's a lot of work. It's getting up each day with that mindset that you're willing to do the work to have the long-term longevity of your marriage.

Stephanie: Well, good advice, Kristen, I would say so. You always have very interesting topics and give people a very unique insight on things they probably never thought about.

Kristen: Thank you!

Stephanie: Thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today. We really appreciate having you.

Kristen: Sure, I enjoyed it.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns and her practice, Wynns Family Psychology, you can visit their website at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. That's Wynns, W-Y-N-N-S, Family Psychology dot com, or you can call 919-467-7777 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. 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. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.