

Lee: Fuzzy Boundaries: affair proofing your marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 227.

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. What's the real story behind infidelity? Where do the marital boundaries lie? Though data varies, many researchers and clinicians would say that about 25% of men and 15% of women engage in an affair during the course of their marriage. Extramarital affairs cross all boundaries. While the news media chronicle the affairs of our leaders and the rich and the famous, chances are we are likely to know couples in our own circles who have experienced infidelity. The research that is available suggests that affairs happen across ethnic and racial lines, in red states and blue ones, in the homes of the rich and in the homes of the poor, regardless of educational level and by both men and by women. Does anyone really want to be part of the statistics? Probably not.

Our guest today, Dr. Kristen Wynns of Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina, says the key to affair proofing your marriage is to, above all, establish boundaries. In addition to that, Kristen has several other important pointers and tips on how to keep your marriage strong and impervious to infidelity. Kristen, welcome back to the show.

Kristen: Thank you.

Lee: I'm excited to be talking about affairs. That is always a topic that gets my attention. I'm so pleased that we can have you on. You've been a long-time guest. I was checking, and you have been on this show now for almost five years' worth of episodes. So it's like you're our guru. You're our go-to expert. So let's get dig into this.

Kristen: All right!

Lee: I know that you have lots of good information, but let's start by talking about this idea of boundaries. How do couples go about setting boundaries. What's that all about?

Kristen: Well, it's important to take a proactive approach, and I think when a lot of people talk about affairs, they're talking about the aftermath of affairs, and dealing with all the horrible repercussions, but from my standpoint, working with couples, in helping with marriages, it's really important to take a proactive approach to affair proof your marriage, so to speak. So one important tip is establishing boundaries, which means talking about ground rules. A lot of couples don't think about this, but it's really helpful, before problems arise, to sit down and talk with your spouse about simple ground rules. Some of the ones that I like are no getting in a car or having social outings with a member of the opposite sex alone, So if you're having tennis dates or lunches or driving to various things or meetings one on one with someone of the opposite sex, that can lead to problems, so it's oftentimes helpful just to have an understanding between the two of you that that kind of thing isn't going to happen.

Lee: Wow, so you're really suggesting that people kind of lay down the law from the get-go, and that sounds like a pretty rigid rule. Don't get in the car with a member of the opposite sex? I mean, like, what about work, and sometimes it has to happen, right?

Kristen: That's a good question. I think the more firm the rules can be up front, the better. But, of course, as real life progresses, as long as you're communicating, it's fine to be flexible. So if there's a trusted co-worker that your spouse knows well and that you have to go to some meeting together, of course, you can be flexible, but it's better to err on the side of caution and have very tight rules up front, and then you can modify them as needed, as long as you're able to talk openly with your spouse about doing that.

Lee: Right. Right. Now I know you don't give us advice that you're not using yourself or in your own practice. That's the good thing about you, is none of this is airy-fairy stuff you're dreaming up. This is where the rubber meets the road. You're seeing it in families, and so I'm curious. When you're setting these rules, when you're setting these boundaries, do couples ever sort of react by saying, "I feel like I'm caged in. I feel like I'm chained down. It's like you're making me unhappy in my life because of these rules. Do you get that kind of feedback?"

Kristen: Sometimes, but generally, if someone feels that way, it's because the rules feel one-sided. So, if somebody has had suspicions about their spouse and come up with these rules just for the spouse, that can lead to someone feeling kind of chained down, but if it's a mutual discussion and it's within that context of, "Hey, let's put some things in place that are just going to protect us." And even with my husband, I know we've done this when we've seen other friends and people in our social circles have these issues. Then we've sat down and said, "Hey, what can we do to make sure this never happens to us?" And as long as it's in that context where you're having a mutual discussion and say, "Let's put these safeguards in place just in case," then both parties should feel more protected and secure as a result, not chained down.

Lee: You're killing me, because I was thinking that these rules would be really good for my wife and that they wouldn't have to apply to me, so I was headed down that road, yeah. Too bad.

Kristen: Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

Lee: OK. So what do you do if you're working with a couple and you're suggesting this idea of having some boundaries, of discussing things in advance, and they just can't agree on a set of rules for their relationship, when they have different ideas about what they should be doing with members of the opposite sex.

Kristen: Well, that's when compromise comes in. So, as much as possible, there might be a legitimate reason someone's having a problem with the rules. You mentioned a business example, and that's one that comes to my mind, so if someone has a job where they need to have meetings with professionals who are the opposite sex, and need to have lunches or coffees, that's fine, again, to tweak the rules, and then say, "All right. Let's compromise here. I can see how that would add stress to you, to not be able to do those things." So, again, as long as it's a discussion and you're compromising and working out rules that work for you and that make sense to you, then it should work out where both parties feel comfortable with it.

Lee: Right. Right. I'm starting to understand why every time you and I have lunch, we do it in a public place with a chaperone. It's all becoming clear today. Right. OK.

Kristen: That's right.

Lee: Yeah. Anyone that's ever seen me knows I'm a chick magnet, so I'm dangerous. I understand now.

Kristen: That's right. It needs to be a very crowded restaurant, right?

Lee: Right. Very crowded. That's right. So that's a big problem for me. Let me ask you this. I really do respect the idea of the boundaries and the rules, and I think that's actually brilliant, and I love it when you're able to bring us something that is so common sense, yet we didn't think of it. It's like, why didn't we talk about this and negotiate this? Why do we just wait until we stumble into a situation that...

Kristen: Right.

Lee: It's crazy, so I love that. What other ideas do you have about affair proofing the marriage. You know, none of us want to get into this situation. What else can we do to stay out of it?

Kristen: Right. Another good idea is to evaluate each spouse's vulnerability, so it may be something that's actually a strength of one's spouse. So maybe, you are very good at listening and you're very empathetic, so people are drawn to you to pour out their heart and soul to you, so that's a strength, but that could be a vulnerability, meaning if you have that kind of tendency, then people, if the opposite sex shares with you and you develop an emotional bond, that could lead to problems. Or if you're naturally a bubbly personality and enthusiastic, this is the one I struggle with, of course, then that kind of thing might come across as being interested in someone, or might be mistaken for something else. So as long as each one is kind of aware of their vulnerabilities, and again, just knowing to be very careful with how they come across or with the reaction they're getting from other people. As long as you're aware of that, then that's the most important thing, and, of course, just avoiding temptation, so if you know that there's somebody at work or somebody in your social circle who's going through a rough time and they want to talk to you, that's fine, but again, just to avoid the temptation and don't get yourself into some of those predicaments. We talked about where you're leaving one on one to go for long walks in the park, or meeting for lunch several times a week in a cozy little cafe. You just want to avoid temptation and again, err on the side of caution and having those good boundaries in place.

Lee: Right. Right. Good, practical advice. My wife does not have to worry. No women ever ask me to go for long walks in the park. It just doesn't come up. They ask me to carry heavy boxes for them, but no walks in the park at all.

Kristen: OK. So they your skill set.

Lee: Right. Exactly. That's right, exactly. I'm sitting here thinking and I'll start wearing, instead of the tank tops, I'll wear something to hide all the muscles, and that'll take care of the problem. Yeah. No, you're getting there. Actually, I think it's fantastic. It really is fantastic advice. It does get everything out on the table. Now, you're making it clear and I think we all know this, that temptation is prevalent. It's really everywhere. Do you think that some people just sort of expect their partners to be perfect and to not have any of these tempting thoughts or inclinations?

Kristen: Probably, but I think if you've been in a relationship for a while, you start to understand that inevitably, someone in the relationship is going to be attracted to someone else. They're going to have a spark with someone else, so I think that the longer you're with someone, you understand that's a part of life, and one thing I'm a big fan of is just disclosing those things. It's not like you have to confess every deep thought with your spouse. However, if it's something like, that you realize you've developed a

crush on someone at work, that kind of thing, I always advise just go ahead and get that out there, because then you're more likely to follow those ground rules if you've told your spouse, "Hey, I just wanted to tell you, I kind of have a silly crush on so and so at work, and I just wanted to fully disclose that," then you're going to be much more likely to follow those ground rules and not be hanging out in that person's cubicle at work, or not going out for drinks after work, so I'm a big fan of going ahead and having full disclosure for those types of things up front.

Lee: Right. Right. Although I look at my wife and I say, "By the way, I'd like to take such and such out behind the barn," and that's not going to go well. I'm just telling you, Kristen, that's not going to get a, "Oh, well thanks for letting me know" kind of reaction.

Kristen: Right. You're right. That's why you don't have to confess all the thoughts, but ones that you know yourself and you can see how, "OK, I'm seeing this person all the time. I need to just go ahead and get this out there," to help both of you stay on top of it. So you have to use your discretion, of course, with which things you confess to, of course.

Lee: Right. Not that there's anyone I want to take out behind the barn, just so that's clear.

Kristen: OK. Good.

Lee: That makes sense, so what about the physical aspect of marriage? What kind of tips do you have for keeping infidelity out of the relationship from that standpoint?

Kristen: These are the ones that are often focused on that are good tips. Clearly you need to keep a sexual relationship going with your spouse and unfortunately, sometimes, I know women can use sex as a punishment or as a weapon, and withhold it if they're not pleased with things. And that's just not a healthy kind of habit to have, because although it's somewhat cliché, it is true that if you're not having a healthy sexual relationship at home, and that's a basic need of people, then unfortunately, that could lead someone to look outside of the relationship. So it's important to keep the sexual relationship going and to not use it as a weapon or punishment, and even just the flirting and dating, that's standard advice, but again, you need to keep the excitement and think of new things to do with your spouse, and make time for dates. All that advice is definitely a part of that proactive approach to keeping the marriage healthy and strong to start with.

Lee: Right. Good. That makes sense, and I like talking about the sex part, but let me ask you about the emotional part as well. What are your ideas on the emotional aspects of everything?

Kristen: Again, it's a little bit stereotyped, but it's true a lot of times, when women have affairs, women's affairs tend to start off as emotional affairs, meaning they have that bonding and attachment with someone else, and then they turn sexual. So for women, it's important to keep the sexual relationship healthy and strong, it's very important to keep the emotional part of the relationship strong, and for men, that means to make sure that you're talking to your wives, asking them about how they're feeling, connecting with them emotionally and meeting their emotional needs. So, it's both the sex and the emotional connection are critical to buffering your relationship from people looking outside of the relationship for meeting those needs.

Lee: Right. So, so what happens if life is going along, and you start to sense something is different in your marriage. There's just a feeling that things maybe aren't quite right. Are there early warning signs for infidelity?

Kristen: There are. And these days, oftentimes it's technology that's a warning sign, so a lot of these things, people start to get nagging suspicions if they see their spouse is jumpy when they're walking by and they're on the computer, and they're trying to hide things on the computer, or keeping their phone with them. Those kinds of signs these days, in the 21st century are, unfortunately, oftentimes signs that something has gone wrong. So if you're seeing those signs and your spouse isn't willing to hand you their phone at any moment or let you walk by and glance at their screen, that's a possible warning sign. And I always recommend, instead of going in guns blazing to assume the worst, it's important to just have a supportive confrontation, meaning you'd just go and say, "Hey, I'm feeling a little bit uncomfortable. I'm seeing some of these things that worry me. Can we sit down and talk about it?"

Lee: Right. Right. Yeah. If you discovered the Ashley Madison app on your spouse's iPhone, that's probably not a good sign. I hear you. Everything is on your phone now, so you're exactly right, that makes a lot of sense. Yeah, I don't let my wife anywhere near my phone. Just kidding, ha ha. But OK. So what if you're on the other side of the affair? You're the one that is engaging in behavior that is maybe, a little questionable. How do you know when you've really crossed the line?

Kristen: OK. If you find yourself really building that emotional intimacy with someone else. So if you find that you're sharing your really personal issues with someone else, or that you're talking about your marriage a lot with someone else. If you really find that emotional bond developing with someone, then that's a sign to yourself to slow down and maybe take a look at what you're doing. Clearly, if you're aware that there's chemistry or sexual tension between you and someone else, and that's obvious, if it's there, you can pick up on that. That's another warning sign that you might be crossing the line or need to just be aware of your interactions with that person. And the last one is just what we were talking about. If you find that you are the one who is deleting your text messages, clearing your history on Facebook, if you're maneuvering in a way that you're trying to cover up things, or if you're not able to sit down and tell your spouse about everything you did that day, the full version and not the edited version, those are signs that you really need to take a step back and look at your actions and probably modify things immediately to make sure you don't continue into dangerous territory.

Lee: Right. Right. Yeah. Let me finish deleting my text messages, here. Give me a second.

Kristen: Your wife is going to get you after hearing this episode.

Lee: If only my wife was interested enough in me to listen to my episodes, right? That would be progress. Although I do want to point out the part where you said that people should have sex regularly. I'm going to put that on some sort of loop, and just, exactly, that was my favorite part of the whole thing. Kristen, we've covered a lot of ground today, and you've given, I just think, some of the most practical advice that is so incredibly helpful. What last words of wisdom, what final tips, what else do we need to know?

Kristen: The last thing I would say is it's really important for couples to realize that affairs can happen in happy marriages. A lot of people think that affairs only happen if you're miserable and you're not having sex with your spouse, and you're not talking, but my experience is, you can be in a happy marriage and, just because you've gone down the path that we've talked about today with developing a relationship

with someone else, you can find yourself in the middle of an emotional or sexual affair, and still have that happy marriage at home. So that's just the final words of caution for people is even if you feel like your relationship with your spouse is fine, it's important to still have these safeguards in place because affairs can happen really under the best of circumstances, with having a healthy marriage at home.

Lee: Great advice. Kristen, thank you so much for talking with us and for being on the show today.

Kristen: You're welcome. I enjoyed it.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns and her practice, Wynns Family Psychology, you can visit their website, and I'll put a link to this in the show notes, but it's at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. You can also reach the offices at 919-467-7777. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will be back with us again next week. For more information about this episode and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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