

Stephanie: The quest for quality time. This is Stay Happily Married episode number 265.

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. How can you make quality time for your relationship when you can't even make time for yourself? "I wish there were more hours in the day."

That's something that I've heard every single one of us utter at some point in our own lives. Between family, work, and children competing for our attention and time, it's easy to see how often we're unable to carve out time for ourselves, let alone our better half.

All too often, our relationships get pushed to the side while we focus on what's directly in front of us. But how long can a relationship sit waiting in the sidelines before it runs out of gas completely? When a night out on the town or a movie date on the couch have become distant memories, it's time to take a hard look at your priorities as a couple and take back the quality time.

Dr. Gabriella Johr is a licensed clinical psychologist with Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Over the last ten years, Gabriella has found herself working with people in various hospital, school, and private practice settings.

Specializing in child and family therapy, Gabriella has a great deal of experience working with couples to manage their family and priorities while still finding time for their marriage. So, welcome back to the show, Gabriella. I'm really glad you could join us today.

Dr. Johr: Thank you for having me.

Stephanie: So we have a very interesting topic today. I know that everyone's situation is different, but what are you finding to be some of the many priorities that act as stressors in a relationship?

Dr. Johr: Well, these days both people are trying to juggle careers, and so they have to manage work stress, like deadlines and traveling for business, and just projects always to advance their careers. In addition to that, they have to raise children and manage their household and that requires nonstop energy. So there's limited downtime.

Then, with the advances in technology you have access to emails and text and Internet. So that can easily make someone preoccupied with work when they're at home, and they're trying to focus on their children and their partner.

Then, sometimes families are dealing with an aging parent or struggling with a family member who has a chronic illness or mental illness. So all of these can obviously be factors that interfere with a couple spending time together.

Stephanie: With all these different priorities pulling someone in different directions, are people ever spending time to focus on themselves even?

Dr. Johr: I mean, unfortunately, most people do have limited personal time, so it is hard to be emotionally available to a partner. So there's not much time for themselves or a partner. Moments of connection, sitting down and having dinner, really do require a great deal of planning and effort and coordination of schedules. So you should expect to be planning for these types of things.

Stephanie: So if these stressors are ignored and they're continuously ignored and not dealt with, what could happen? What would the results be?

Dr. Johr: Well, over time without working to maintain a connection, it's common for one or both people in the couple to feel neglected or lonely, resentful, and to view the relationship as a low priority on the totem pole.

So with all this juggling, couples can start to improve their situation by acknowledging that the problem is not their partner, but rather that there's a lack of time. If the couple can stand together and try to problem solve against the enemy, which is the lack of time not the other person, they can start to shift the dynamic of blame.

Stephanie: Oh.

Dr. Johr: That's important so that they can both feel like they're motivated to be creative around the time constraint so that they can find the time to be together.

Stephanie: So it's more about not putting the blame on someone else, but trying to deal with the root of the issue together.

Dr. Johr: It's identifying the lack of time as the problem.

Stephanie: Oh.

Dr. Johr: As their common enemy, if you could...

Stephanie: I like that. I like that. Yeah. Now, there's obviously a time at some point in the past where couples had time to dedicate to each other. It's most likely how they ended up dating and married, but are there any excuses that you hear commonly from people not being able to dedicate this time for each other?

Dr. Johr: Well, the common mis-perceptions that the couples have that lead to a lot of dissatisfaction are one, that spending a lot of time together is more meaningful than if they had shorter periods of time together. That's not really the case.

Couples fare better when they can have shorter moments of connection throughout the day, compared to feeling just connected when they are, let's say, on vacation or they have a lot of

time. Since the quantity is hard to come by, the quality time and small gestures can make a tremendous difference.

Then, couples sometimes believe that everything has to be spontaneous, and that being spontaneous makes the connection more meaningful. Like, you just had to make love to your wife in that moment, or you're really a high priority if someone puts the work down aside to be with the person right that second. So that's somewhat unrealistic that time together could be spontaneous like that, given all the time constraints that people usually have.

Then, another kind of expectation is that you should be able to have it all. You should have an amazing career, and your household should run smoothly. Your children are amazing. You have a great sex life, and you have leisure time. That's kind of a very unrealistic expectation. So if you can work on those expectations, you will have more satisfaction in your relationships and be more motivated to make time.

Stephanie: So they want their cake and they want to eat it, too. They want a little bit of everything.

Dr. Johr: I mean, who doesn't? Right?

Stephanie: So how do couples begin to start trying to make one another a priority in their lives?

Dr. Johr: So getting into a routine of being connected throughout the day and sticking to that routine is really important. Though, kind of moments of connection, I mean, it could be a minute or two, a hug, a kiss, a shoulder rub, a call just to check in knowing that it's not going to be a long conversation. That kind of sets the stage and acts as a reminder that your partner is there, and they want to be with you.

Of course, this doesn't replace date night and longer periods that you need to talk with your partner and to really find out what's going on, have sex, but it does - shorter interactions like that, like I said, establishes a baseline to promote the motivation to keep going and to have longer periods of time together.

Stephanie: So it's not necessarily the solution. It's the start of the solution.

Dr. Johr: And it's the maintenance of...

Stephanie: Maintenance.

Dr. Johr: ...doing that, those little things over time.

Stephanie: Okay. For the couples that think love needs to be spontaneous, like you had said, how does a routine like this fit into their situation?

Dr. Johr: Well, I mean, I hear you. But the reality is that most of us are on like automatic pilot, and being spontaneous is just a difficult thing because we've developed routines that help us

function with all these other demands. It's important to keep in mind that not being spontaneous has less to do with how your partner feels about you, and more to do with all the stress that they have to manage.

So you can schedule time to be spontaneous, like a block of time once a week where you don't know what you're going to do, but it's scheduled in there. So you kind of have a little bit of both.

Stephanie: Okay. I like that. The scheduling to be spontaneous, that sounds very much like something I would do. Now, when you make time for your spouse, does that mean that you have to give up time for something else, just given the situation how we are so stretched for time?

Dr. Johr: I'd say yes. I mean, like I said, it's impossible to have it all, and what people sometimes do is they try to fit everything, as much as they can, into everybody's schedules, so their schedules, their children's schedules. It's understandable, but unfortunately the quality of everyone's connections becomes diminished. You're not able to enjoy the moment because you're always thinking about what's the next thing that you need to do.

So couples really have to reassess the basics and slow down and decide what their priorities are. They have to figure out what they want more of and what they could do without. Maybe it's having less social engagements or cutting down on activities for their kids, or not committing to so many big projects at work that require nights or weekends. I mean if that's possible.

Also, I think another thing that's helpful is really establishing boundaries, primarily with work and even with kids, especially if they're older. You don't have to do everything at work right when you get it. So you have to think about what you absolutely have to do in the moment versus what can wait.

Stephanie: I like that. I like that. That's a good excuse for people to kind of let loose a little bit, I guess, and kind of get back to basics, what they really want, what they really did enjoy, I guess, before things get very hectic and responsibilities start to weigh things down.

Now, in a situation like this, how is blame a factor? Like you said in the very beginning there, rather than blaming a spouse for something, you work to find the solutions together. How would blame play a role in this?

Dr. Johr: Well, I think another factor that comes up, or mis-perception, is that people think that their partner has total control over their schedule. They can make decisions about what they can and can't do and what they can kind of prioritize, and somehow lack of time together means that their partner is being withholding and not giving them the time that they're asking for.

The truth is that work and family demands are very real and we all experience them, and most often there's really not so much flexibility in making dramatic changes in your time availability. But with that said, assessing your schedules as a team, like a couple against this issue of time, and demonstrating the desire and the follow-through to make small changes.

So less time on the Internet or shut your phone off during dinner or sit down to dinner together a few times a week, having more sex, bringing home flowers, saying, "I love you". All those little demonstrations that show appreciation kind of can help the fact that you feel like there's not a whole chunk of time that you can devote to your partner.

Stephanie: I do like that. I think a lot of people don't think about their calendars and their schedules because I'm like that, too. I can look at other people and wonder why they can't make a time. It is their schedule. But even I, myself, know that my own schedule, I'm not necessarily master of the domain there, and things get put upon me by other people, but I think a lot of people really don't focus on that and they don't see that.

So after working through all these issues, what guarantee is there that the couple's effort that they've put into everything so far will keep this new priority system going to put each other first and make time for each other?

Dr. Johr: How do you stay motivated to maintain it? So couples need to remember how much fun they can have with their partner so that they're motivated to make the effort. If you can picture a time when you did have less stress, if that ever existed, or you did feel closer to your partner - maybe it was before kids. Or maybe there was a time when you traveled together, or were able to have more sex or just lay in bed and relax ten more minutes in the morning.

If you can visualize that and kind of miss that connection, what your connection was in the past can improve your motivation to seek more of those moments of intimacy in the future. If you start to reminisce about the past and start to feel resentful of your partner because things probably have changed, remember that it's life demands and not your partner who's at fault. So you both need to find a way to improve the reality of the situation.

Then, once couples feel more connected, it does require less effort and motivation to pull yourself away from the Internet or from something to keep up the momentum. It's like your relationship is like your backyard. If a lot of time passes and you neglect it, when you get back to it it's a mess. You're overwhelmed. You're distressed.

You just want to avoid it, and you dread doing all the stuff, the mowing, and the pulling of the weeds, but if you maintain your yard on a consistent basis, it does feel more manageable, and it does offer you a peaceful oasis that you want to go back to. So I know that's kind of a funny analogy, but...

Stephanie: No, I like that. That procrastination, it really does have a double negative effect, when I guess you put things off and put things off. That's very true. I like that analogy.

Dr. Johr: Yeah. It feels harder to get back to and you kind of forget how good it can sometimes feel, which is sometimes what happens with couples.

Stephanie: I think that that phrase sums it all up. You forget how good it is and how good it can feel, and that's why things tend to bog you down, other priorities and responsibilities. Is there anything else, Gabriella, that you'd like to mention to our listeners today before we let you go?

Dr. Johr: Sure. I think couples present in therapy when one person wants more connection and is having trouble reaching his or her partner despite all these efforts. They're doing all those little things, and it's not getting them anywhere, or a partner feels a great deal of resentment and is not very motivated to come together with their partner.

So working through past hurts, establishing new patterns with your partner in therapy is certainly helpful to get a couple back on track. So if that's something you're experiencing, possibly coming to therapy could be helpful.

Stephanie: Well, thank you very much, Gabriella. I'm very happy that you could come back and join us for another episode today. Thank you so much.

Dr. Johr: You're welcome.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Gabriella Johr and Orenstein Solutions, you can visit them online at orensteinsolutions.com, or call 919-428-2766 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 any of our previous episodes, you can visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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