

Stephanie: Navigating the holidays with your family. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 273.

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. Do you have what it takes to survive the holidays with your step-family and in-laws? The holiday season is a fun-filled time for families to celebrate being together and sharing traditions with one another. The Christmas lights, the carolers and the smell of ham cooking in the kitchen is enough to send anyone into a blissful holiday euphoria. Watching children open their presents while cookies bake in the oven is a scene set for happiness and joy. With family packed around the table, we can see all of our wonderful blessings right in front of us.

However, sometimes, those wonderful blessings may not be able to get along with one another as well as you had hoped. Introducing families to each other for the first time is always something that's very stressful. Throw in the holiday season and you have a recipe for disaster. Managing to keep everyone happy and stress-free could result in a full-on meltdown for the happy host. Are you equipped to navigate sharing the holidays with parents, in-laws and step-families, turning the chaotic holiday gathering into a loving family picture that you had hoped for?

Doctor Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones is owner of KKJ Forensic and Psychological services in Durham, North Carolina. Katrina has worked with many families during the separation and divorce process and understands the many challenges facing committed couples today. She's worked with individuals and couples, dealing with issues of infidelity, retirement and even becoming new parents. Doctor Jones has experience in private practice, community mental health and criminal justice system. Welcome back to the show, Katrina. I'm really glad you could join us.

Katrina: Thank you.

Stephanie: So the holidays can be a very stressful time of year. What are you seeing when it comes to families coming together during the holidays?

Katrina: What I've seen as a common thread in my practice, as well as just my personal life, is that families always have to struggle with how they're going to spend time during the holidays and who they're going to spend that time with. So, whether it's navigating the holidays with your parents, your in-laws, step families, it could be particularly stressful if, you know, especially when people don't live in the area and in this area, in the triangle area, where I'm located, that's true for a lot of families. But the good news is that that just means that there are so many people who love us and want to share time with us. That's what I try to remind myself.

Stephanie: That's a good way to look at it. So what problems are you seeing couples experiencing when it comes to that, sharing the holidays with families, whether they're local or from out of town?

Katrina: Well, no one really wants to hurt anyone's feelings, right? They don't want to make some family member feel more or less important than another or feel left out, but it's really hard to balance what each partner and the couple wants with what everyone else is requesting. So, if you're used to spending the holidays with certain people, it's hard to break out of that mold and when people form new families,

whether it's through divorce, re-marriage, having your own child, then your priorities shift, and this can lead to conflict within the couple regarding what they thought were agreements or rules about how to share the holidays, so, "This is what we've always done and now you're trying to change the rules on me." And then, depending on the couple, each partner might also have very different ideas about what traditions to maintain versus forming new traditions for their family. You know, it might seem like a small thing whether you have a turkey or a ham, but that can lead to a lot of conflict because it's not just about what you're eating. It's about why and what does that mean to you and are you celebrating different religions, different cultures? Do you have different days that you celebrate? You know, are you exchanging presents? Who do you do that with? How many people? How much do you spend? And then there's always the guilt. So, you know, what if your family is telling you to follow what they've always done, but that just doesn't work for you anymore, whether it's financially or with what you want to do as a couple or, again, that kind of changing priority.

Stephanie: So, it seems like a lot of time bombs there, just waiting, all the different issues around the holidays.

Katrina: Yeah.

Stephanie: So, what are the negative effects that arise when these couples, they can't balance the requests or the differences in opinion of their family members with their own priorities, either individually or as a couple?

Katrina: So, partners may feel like their spouse does not support what they want and this, of course, can lead to conflict and resentment within the relationship. It can lead to that feeling of, you know, why, I'm just going to say it, mother-in-law, right? "Why does your mom and what she wants more important than what I want?" And so, it can also lead to resentment toward the family, you know, "If I could have my holiday the way that I'd want it, if you would just stop making my husband feel guilty about it," type of thing. So, it really can lead, not just to kind of in the moment conflict, but ongoing, you know, whether it's passive aggressive comments, people changing plans at the last minute to make things more difficult, just showing up and, you know, long-term resentment within the relationship and the family.

Stephanie: Imagine a very Everybody Loves Raymond scenario with the mother, the mother-in-law there, that's always a fun picture.

Katrina: Right. Right.

Stephanie: So, at what point do you see couples beginning to realize they can't meet the demands of their family during the holidays or the demands of kind of anyone else who's outside the couple?

Katrina: Usually, it's when a couple faces gridlock, meaning that you've had the same conversation over and over again and you just can't come to a decision. That's usually a sign that if we're that stuck, that we're really not able to balance things out and we're going to have to do something different. Not making a decision usually means that somebody else in the family has therefore made the decision for you, so while that alleviates the stress of saying no to somebody, again, it can lead to resentment either toward your partner or the person who is kind of unofficially making the decision for the couple. Some people will also find that they want to avoid the holiday altogether, so they feel more withdrawn, apathetic, "I don't want to," you know, depending on how you celebrate it, "I don't want to go shopping,

I don't want to get a tree, I don't want to do cards, I don't want to do parties." You know, they get overly focused on drinking or eating too much and that's usually a sign that things aren't going the way they should be going.

Stephanie: Have you seen any trends among couples that are struggling with this balancing act, this gridlock, with the ones that their family, kind of matching up with their own expectations for the holiday?

Katrina: Sure. There are a couple of different areas that there seem to be some trends. So, for relocation, you know, either that one family lives closer than the other or that both families are far away. And then it's a struggle between, you know, do you decide you're going to take turns with one family versus the other each year? Are you going to try to see both families on one specific day within that week? Often when the couple moves away from the family of origin, so when people move down to this area, then the family of origin can see it as the couple's responsibility to come home for the holidays and they get really rigid around, "Well, this is the way we've always done it, and you're the ones who moved away."

Stephanie: Ah, so they're kind of putting that blame on them...

Katrina: Right.

Stephanie: ...for the distance. Okay.

Katrina: Right. Having children is often a turning point for couples. It certainly was for me. Wanting to establish your own traditions, not wanting to travel with young children, you know, wanting to have Santa Claus at your house or wanting to go on vacation with your children and your spouse because that's when you have time off from work and feeling like you are always kind of spending your off-time with your family of origin, so your parents, your in-laws, rather than that you get to kind of spend that time doing something with your own made-up family. And then also, having your kids move out of the house. So, they've gone off to college and you might decide, now's the time I'm going to go to the Caribbean for Christmas.

Stephanie: Ah, that's what it is.

Katrina: But your sister doesn't like that idea or maybe your parents don't like that idea or your adult children are really wedded to the idea of coming home during the holidays and kind of doing things the way that they've always been done.

Stephanie: So, what guidance do you have for couples handling the conflicting needs of their family with their wanting to do it their own way?

Katrina: Well, it's important for couples to be on the same page. You need to have a conversation with your partner about what you really want and why. The why is particularly important to help your partner understand that it's not just about changing the rules or wanting things your way, and this can be a very difficult conversation for couples to have. So, you really need to plan out what you want to say, you know, think about the timing of when you bring it up. Don't a week before a holiday say, "I'd like to change things this year," you know. And then, have your own plans for how you're willing to make a compromise work. So, going into the conversation knowing what you want is important, but it's

just as important to know where you're willing to give, so, "This is my bottom line, but I'm willing to do XYZ to make all of these different things work."

And then whatever plan you develop as a couple, that's what you communicate to your family. So, not seeking out advice from your family about how should we make this work because honestly, just because people are people. They're going to say, "Well, we don't want you to make any changes to your plan," and so, really developing your plan as a couple and then communicating that, some people choose to do that as a couple, but whether you do it individually with your family or as a couple, whatever family you're talking to, the spouses from that family really needs to take the lead. So, making sure that you're not throwing your partner under the bus.

You know, don't say it was their idea to make changes in the plan because you want to get out of conflict with your family and then establishing clear expectations and boundaries. So, "This is what we're willing to do, you know, this is kind of our bottom line, but this is what we're willing to do." You know, "We can come to you, you can come to us, we can go to a different place, we can do this," and but really having options rather than, this is just the way that it's going to happen.

Stephanie: So, what specific expectations and boundaries would you suggest that people set forth? You know, we have the open communication as you said and kind of doing that without procrastination, but what would you recommend the first ones be?

Katrina: Sure. Well, this is one you really don't have the conversation before you're ready to have it. So, really knowing what your bottom line is so that you can stick to it and not changing your plans too much from year to year, so that you don't find yourself in a position of changing your plans based on pressure from someone in the family. Sometimes developing a story that can help them be empathetic towards your position is a good idea. So, I know that you were lucky enough to all live in the same area, so you never had to make a choice between, you know, spending time alone with your children versus with your parents.

You know, that kind of thing can evoke an, "Oh yeah, I get that," which is very different than, "I'm so sorry that we're changing things," as if you're doing something wrong that you should feel guilty about because that gives more room for people to say, "Yeah, you should be sorry and maybe you shouldn't do this." Understanding that your family might not be as supportive of your choice to make a change and just remembering that a part of differentiating yourself from your family is being able to tolerate their distress with your need to grow, you know, validate that, "Yep, I understand this is hard, but this is what I've decided to do," and while you're doing that, really thinking about how do you balance what your goal is with maintaining your relationship with your family, but as well as maintaining what's good for you as an individual and then what's necessary as a couple.

Stephanie: What benefits would couples, what would they expect to gain when they define their expectations and their boundaries to their family members and they start acting on this plan and these suggestions that you have?

Katrina: Trying to keep in mind that having a difficult conversation one year can lead to happiness many years ahead so that you enjoy the holidays rather than experiencing ongoing conflict. Eventually your family will re-adjust. They might not like it at first; they might give you a lot of push back, but if you're really clear about, you know, why this is something that's important to you, then eventually, they will understand and they will find a way to help make things work for you.

Stephanie: Well, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know as they're going into this holiday season?

Katrina: I think that thinking about families where there's a divorce or a re-marriage is a particularly, kind of sticky thing for people to deal with this time of year. It can be confusing for children when there's a divorce, particularly in the first year, to figure out how holidays are shared.

So, family members might not be supportive of your need to change the routine, you know, but if you have to do that for legal reasons because of an agreement or you just need your own change, you might be used to spending time with your in-laws and now you don't really know where you stand with their family and it's also a difficult time for parents, as they might be separated from their children for the first time.

So, you know, really kind of thinking about planning ahead that this is a, you know, if this particularly, if it's a first year, "What do I need to plan for?" And then if there's a remarriage, blending families can be particularly stressful during the holidays. I think that there's a lot of pressure in general around the holidays for everyone to be one big happy family.

Stephanie: Yes.

Katrina: Right? And then also blending families. There's a lot of pressure that everybody just has to get along, but you have many of the same issues regarding shared times and different traditions and children may be exposed to a new family who they don't really know and expected to be warm and open, but they miss, you know, their grandparents from a different family, or their cousins and they feel like they're surrounded by strangers. Even if they'd known the step-family for a while, they might still feel like, "I don't belong here," and that can feel insulting to a new partner, a new family and make a parent feel stuck in the middle and so again, it's about kind of being aware of that type of thing and planning ahead of time, having those conversations with your partner and with your children and then really trying to keep in mind that the holidays are about sharing, right, comfort and joy? And if you're feeling overly stressed, then it's a sign, "Okay, now might really be the year that we really have to make a change, and how are we going to have that conversation and make it happen?"

Stephanie: Well, Katrina, thank you so much for coming back to the show and talking with us and prepping everyone for the holiday season.

Katrina: Well, thank you. It's my pleasure.

Stephanie: To find out more about Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones and her practice, KKJ Forensic and Psychological Services, you can visit their website at KKJPsych.com or you can call 919-493-1975 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 or any of our previous episodes, you can visit us online at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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