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## Episode 38: Daily Practices for Happy Stepouples

Guests: Mike and Jayna Haney

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**Jayna:** I think with stepfamily couples if you add anything else into that, like a lawsuit or having a difficult ex or having lots of issues with the children—

**Ron:** —or a pandemic.

**Jayna:** —or a pandemic, [Laughter] all of these things happen and then you're just left with, "This is nothing like what I wanted or thought it was going to be like."

**Ron:** From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network this is *FamilyLife Blended*. I'm Ron Deal.

This donor-supported podcast brings together timeless wisdom and practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

You know whatever you invest yourself in on a regular basis, your habits, not only become common place, but they actually shape our decisions and how we view the world. What are the habits, the daily practices of your marriage, and how can they make your blended family marriage stronger? Stay with me. That's the subject of this edition of *FamilyLife Blended*.

My guests are Mike and Jayna Haney. They live in Houston, Texas and are a blended family with four children. Mike is an international energy executive and coach to divorced men, husbands and fathers. Jayna is a marriage and family therapist, trauma therapist and stepfamily coach. Together they started The Bridge Across and work with single parents and stepfamilies.

At the time of this conversation, we were still sheltering at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked Mike and Jayna if they had seen any residue from that in the couples that they work with.

**Jayna:** I think it's really, really difficult. I think couples that are having any sort of issues, those issues get magnified; those issues get intensified so the struggles get bigger.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Jayna:** I know some of the couples that I was working with before the pandemic, some of those couples have separated; some of those couples feel like it means that they're

not supposed to be together. What I just have told them is, “That’s not true.” [Laughter] “That’s not necessarily accurate. It’s just a really difficult time.”

**Ron:** Yes.

**Jayna:** I’ve just asked them to put a pause on it. Sometimes couples who are going through a difficult time, they hit a time like this and it actually can bring them closer together. But I do think that’s a myth. I mean we’d like to think when we go through difficult times, we can put everything else aside and hold on together. But I think it’s awfully hard, because a lot of times couples also then get overwhelmed.

That’s what I have seen for most of my clients. I do a lot of work with single parents and stepfamilies. Most of those folks are just completely overwhelmed. They are—they’ve got to bring their work home. They’re homeschooling children, and they don’t have time to breathe.

**Ron:** That’s a really good word as we jump into our conversation for our listener. We’re going to be talking today about daily practices of happy couples. But I’m mindful that somebody’s listening right now and they’re going, “Yeah, we’re not really happy right now.” So putting a pause on it, as you said, I think is a good word.

Just invite our listener right now to sit back, to just hear this, to take it in. You may be thinking, “Boy, I just wish we could implement *that* idea in our marriage today.” Maybe you can’t, but maybe there’s a pause here and there’s going to be a time and place when you can come back and implement some of these ideas.

For other people that are listening, you’re going, “Yeah, boy, that’s a little kick start that we need to get us—just bump our direction in a different way, in a better way.” I think what we’re going to share today is a lot of practical ideas, things you can be mindful of on a daily and weekly basis, that will move your relationship in a better direction.

You guys like to share some research that I’ve been familiar with as well that says that marital satisfaction in a first marriage starts out really high and then it slowly declines as kids come along and careers kick in and that sort of thing, and then tends to rise up again as couples get later in life and the empty nest and that marital satisfaction rises up again.

But in a stepfamily marriage the trajectory is a little bit different. [Laughter] Marital satisfaction starts out moderate and then quickly declines and then it begins to climb. If the couple can stay together and they can merge their family and over time the family identity is born, then the couple’s marital satisfaction begins to rise again. It’s a different sort of trajectory.

Why do you think that is with stepfamily couples? And I’m curious if your marriage and family went through something similar.

**Mike:** Ron, I think this is a key element of what we've learned both from our first and second marriages. The idea about being intentional about what you do and what you don't do is something that we've had to learn to some degree the hard way.

But I will say that one of the things that really connected Jayna and I so much in the beginning was that willingness to learn about one another and try to be in a situation where we were thinking about what had happened to us before and those relationships and then how can we make it better going forward.

Because there are plenty of things that couples do to irritate one another. I know that I still do many of those things with my lovely bride here, but the idea here is to try to be as intentional as possible. Some of these practices that we've thought about and put into action over the last few years I think have really helped us.

**Ron:** Willingness to learn; be intentional.

**Mike:** Right.

**Jayna:** I think with stepfamily couples—because we did a lot of things a lot of other couples do—we did premarital counseling and we read books and we did all those things that many stepfamily couples try to do and then when it does go down very quickly because we talk a lot about the outside folks, your exes, and all the melding of all the different people and how strange and crazy that time is often around things that you don't have any control over.

Even if you and your partner are good, there are all these other parts that are moving around you that, and they have importance, right, in-laws and exes and your children and all these people in your life and all these situations and even schools and how you're dealing with that. It's just very, very difficult—and your friends your new friends and your old friends. That's a lot of reason why I think it goes down so quickly. It plummets and then you're very overwhelmed.

I remember us thinking, "We did all these things and it's still so hard." Then we were like, "Okay, what are we going to do about this?" Then if you add anything else into that like a lawsuit or having a difficult ex or having lots of issues with the children—

**Ron:** —or a pandemic.

**Jayna:** —or a pandemic! [Laughter] or anything or a job loss. I mean I do a lot of work with couples where they've got married and their financial situation is good and then one of them loses a job. All of these things happen. Then you're just left with, "This is nothing like what I wanted or thought it was going to be like."

**Ron:** Yes.

**Jayna:** I mean, our joke was a year in to our marriage, “Honey, when we said, ‘For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,’ really do we have to do all of that in the first year?” [Laughter]

**Ron:** I’m getting a word picture as you’re talking; it’s this swirling windstorm that’s going on around you while you’re trying to be husband and wife, while you’re trying to figure out your us-ness and how to love one another. But then you’ve got this storm going on around you of just different dynamics, key word you said there, that you can’t control. You mean our listener can’t control everything going on. Is that what you’re telling us right now?

**Jayna:** Right.

**Ron:** They need to own that, right? [Laughter]

**Mike:** Right.

**Jayna:** In some part of us, we understand that we really don’t control that much in the world when we really sit back and look at it. But I do think as we move throughout our life, we do tend to somehow believe that there are certain things that we do control; that we do believe that God is looking over us and that He controls it and there are certain things that He’s not going to allow to happen to us.

There’s kind of this veil that we operate around in the world. Then I think when things happen to us that really mess all of that up and disrupt it in such a way and we find ourselves in a place that we never thought we would be, it rocks our world—

**Ron:** It does.

**Jayna:** —and people in our lives who have never been in that position *cannot* understand that.

**Ron:** Right, right.

**Jayna:** That’s when we are talking to our parent or a friend and they’re like, “Well, you just need to get over that,” or “You just need to get yourself together.”

**Ron:** “No, you just don’t understand the whirlwind. You don’t know the whirlwind I’m living in.”

**Jayna:** That’s right!

**Ron:** I’ve always said, when other people look at my life and say, “Here’s what you need to do,” Ron, I’ve always said, “Yes, it’s easy because it’s not your life.”

**Jayna:** It's not your life!

**Ron:** It's always easier from the outside. What you're saying is we know intuitively we don't control the world, but when pain hits, when fear comes, when anxiety rises, we try to get some more control over what's going on because we don't want more pain. We don't want more tension, more anxiety, more conflict. We're trying to put a limit on that.

Yes, it's understandable that that's the mechanism that kicks in. Yet oftentimes we make things worse by some of our controlling efforts rather than making things a little bit better.

To the listener, here's what we're going to give you today: we're going to get really practical about trying to nurture your marriage in the midst of that whirlwind that we've been talking about. We're going to share—the Haney's have some what they call "Daily Practices", just things practically you can do be intentional in this way. Maybe one of them is going to stick for you in your relationship. Maybe two or three or five are going to stick with you. Just listen and absorb and see if you can't implement these.

Alright, so let's just jump in.

Daily Practice: "Go for perfection," you guys say, "Go for perfection in moments only. Life is only perfect about one percent of the time"

I *love* that one. I love that. Let's talk around it. What are we talking about here? What do you mean go for perfection in moments only?

**Jayna:** The overriding arch of all of these practices, Ron, is that small changes make big changes, right? In all of these things that we talk about, one of the big problems that people always face when they think about making any change is, "I'm so overwhelmed. I can't make change." But small things that we do can have huge consequences in positive ways. One little thing can make a big difference and everybody's capable of doing one little thing.

When we talk about perfection in moments only—when Mike and I were very first dating we were really happy. We didn't know what tomorrow was going to bring. We did not know where our relationship was going to take us. I even remember—I remember saying to him, "I am just so happy right now. I am so happy to be with somebody where it feels comfortable and who gets some parts of me that I haven't felt understood about for so long."

Like I have all this energy and for a long time as a person I felt like I needed to push that energy down or that energy was too much, right? Mike has a lot of energy and I always thought I needed to be with someone that had less energy than I did.

**Ron:** He's an energy engineer for crying out loud.

**Mike:** There you go.

**Jayna:** But I mean for a lot of my life I thought I was too much. Here I was with somebody who, not only did he like me too much, he wanted me to be more of who I was. That was really hard for me to understand. I was in my 30's. I said to him, "When I say to you, 'I'm just so happy.' I don't want you to think that that means I want to marry you. I just want you to know I'm happy right now."

And he's like, "Okay."

**Ron:** There you go.

**Jayna:** We just agreed that when we said things that the other person would understand that it was meant for that moment. That was how it started. It started when we were dating.

Then we dated for several years without involving our children. We had some reasons for doing that. Then when we got married, we would have these plans for the weekends with our children and we would have trouble. Things wouldn't go right. We would have issues come up. We would come to the end of the weekend and we would be disappointed. We would be like, "Oh, that didn't go right. I was—I just wanted to have a perfect weekend."

Then we started realizing that was totally wrong to think that way.

**Ron:** You were building it up into something

**Jayna:** We were building it up—

**Ron:** —into, "Boy, we're going to have this fabulous weekend. The kids are here. We're going to do this. We're going to do that."

**Jayna:** It was never going to happen.

**Ron:** You couldn't achieve that.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** Then you felt like you were a failure?

**Jayna:** We just felt like we were—it was never going to happen. This is when we were dating and we started doing things together with our kids. We would make a plan and it wouldn't work out.

Then we stopped trying to make those times with our children perfect when we were dating and we started focusing on what went right and we started counting all the things that went right. We discovered we could come up with a whole lot of moments that went right.

Then that's just what we started focusing on. We would still look at what didn't go well, and we would talk about what small changes we could make but then we just started focusing on all the good moments. That was how we started counting everything.

**Ron:** What I love about this is that it is a—small changes you were talking about—but it is a significant change over time. Instead of shifting towards building up for these grand moments that somehow equal family-ness, “We have achieved the blend; we have accomplished the goal of when we got married.” That's such a high standard. There's no way you can do that.

**Jayna:** There's no way.

**Ron:** But to downshift that and go, “I just had a 10-minute conversation with a stepchild that normally things are really awkward and weird but that was actually nice. I'm just going to rest in that 10 minutes. No it was not a perfect day, but it was a really nice 10 minutes.” That kind of feeds your soul, doesn't it, in some ways?

**Mike:** It really does, especially in the beginning when it feels like things are so fraught. You're bringing the families together. You're bringing the children together. Again, we were fortunate in many ways. Our children were roughly the same ages and they were ultimately young. But still there was a lot of moments there where we were—I was anxious about, “What we would be doing all together. Would everyone get along? Would it all work out? Would I say something that I shouldn't have?”

Of course, those are the things that always are worrying to me. Again, we made—I made plenty of mistakes during that time. One of the things that Jayna and I really try to do is learn from that. Where I think that I'm really grateful for our relationship with one another is that we've done this intentional learning about what's gone well, what hasn't, and these moments are what we like to go back to, “Oh, remember that moment we did that. That really was nice.”

**Jayna:** When we got married, we didn't try to have a perfect wedding day. We just said, “Okay, we're just going to count the moments. We're going to count the good moments.” And that's what we did. So we didn't—and we didn't try to set up perfect weekends with our children any more. We didn't try to set up standards for our children that they couldn't meet.

We don't have a perfect family now. We have four children. They're in their 20's. Our relationships have ebbed and flowed. We don't pretend to have a perfect family.

Relationships with your children and stepfamily life, they ebb and flow just like in nuclear families.

**Ron:** Yes, that's right.

**Jayna:** Nuclear families are the same. As you move through transitions in middle school and high school and college as adults, those relationships will ebb and flow. You will have times of closeness. You will have times of misunderstanding and it needs to be okay.

We need to *not* feel like we always have to be close and we always have to prove things, especially in divorced families where there are two parents and they may have very, very different parenting styles. We need to get out of the belief or the pressure of feeling like all stepfamilies have to present as being really close all the time.

**Ron:** Yes, that's a really good word to our listener. This is not the don't-worry-be-happy speech. Just ignore all the things you're struggling with. That's not what this is. This is just be willing to notice the moments that are going well and take that in. Don't have your standards so high that you can't enjoy those moments because at that point then there's not much feeding your sense that we can do this. I think that's so important.

Okay, Daily Practice Number Two: "When our problems overwhelm us..."—so now we've turned a corner—"When our problems overwhelm us," you guys say, "talk to God; practice your faith in the little things"

Tell me about that.

**Mike:** In our case—everyone's faith walk is different—in my case I was not nearly as strong in that area as Jayna is and was. I was really grateful for that. When I came out of my first marriage, I knew that was speaking to me and I knew that I had to do more in that area. I'm grateful to say I've come a long way in that area.

Again everyone's faith walk is an endless journey, right?

**Ron:** Right, right.

**Mike:** We're never all the way there but I feel I've come a long way in the last 29 years or so. But I think that one of the things that I knew that Jayna was a great fit for me was that she was very much attuned in this area. I found a real way to speak to her about these things very early in our relationship. That really helped a lot.

What is the line? "When you make a plan God laughs," or what have you. It kind of goes back to what we talked about earlier. You plan this great event or great weekend or great what have you, and at the end of the day, it's just a few moments you look back to that are really powerful.

**Ron:** Hey, Mike, let me drill down a little bit on that. I'm wondering what it was like for you coming into the marriage. Maybe did you have a sense that she was a little spiritually ahead of you or just had a stronger faith?

**Mike:** Yes, I think that's definitely true.

**Ron:** I'm wondering how did you talk to her? How did you grow in that space? I mean was that a bit intimidating? I know a lot of men would go, "Man, I don't know. She just prays like I can't pray like that. Like, I don't even know what to bring up or talk about."

I'm just wondering how you navigated that?

**Mike:** I was grateful in the sense that coming out of my first marriage I knew there was something larger out there. I knew I had to find something bigger. It was not about me and my life here on this earth. There was something bigger at stake. That's what drew me closer to learn more about God. Then when I started interacting with Jayna I recognized that part of her that I knew would be helpful to me and in alignment with what I was learning and doing.

**Ron:** Yes. I guess I just imagine that at some point, Mike, you had to find the courage to step into that faith space, even though you kind of felt unequal or uneven maybe with her.

**Mike:** Yes, I think that's—

**Jayna:** That's never stopped Mike. [Laughter]

**Mike:** No, I tend to step forward pretty aggressively.

**Jayna:** Mike was brokenhearted after his first marriage and I think that that was what helped him to move in.

**Mike:** That was a big moment, yes.

**Jayna:** I think he just moved there because—

**Mike:** Yes. My—I love my parents. They were married for 53 years together, what have you. My mother passed away a few years ago. They just had modeled this great relationship. I was really fortunate to be able to see that. I knew that there was—it was possible to have a man, woman love one another and use daily practices and be attuned to one another, so I was really looking for that.

When I saw my own path with God trying to emerge and I saw that with her I knew that it was a good sign for our relationship together.

**Ron:** That's great. This is good stuff guys. Let's do another one.

Daily Practice: "Respect your partner's reality. Don't tiptoe around the issues"

It's true. You guys make the point that everybody has their own little reality about their situation—how they're making sense of it. Should kids have that sense and reality that they're facing adults, parent and stepparent, can have very different realities about what's going on. So what's this respect your partner's reality piece?

**Jayna:** In stepfamily life, each person has their own role. With that role comes certain feelings, right?

The biological parent has certain feelings. They feel torn between their child or their children and their partner, right? They love their new partner. They want to have that relationship work. They love their child. They want to be able to continue that relationship. They feel responsible to their child. They're worried about that. They need to get along with their ex. They've got to make that relationship work to some extent.

They feel torn. They feel conflicted. The stepparent—they want to be in the family. They want to feel a part. They want to feel included and oftentimes they feel left out. They feel like they're not getting communicated with.

The children in the family, they're afraid. They want both of their parents to get along. They still want to be important to their biological parent. They want the stepparent to like them usually. If they don't, it's not because they don't *really*. It's just because they feel conflict between their biological parent and their stepparent and their other parent.

The point is each of these people in the family has feelings and those feelings almost are always the same. They almost always come up and it's not going to change. I've hardly ever met a stepparent that doesn't have those feelings. I've never met a biological parent and I'm sure you haven't either.

**Ron:** Right.

**Jayna:** The point is, in stepfamily life, which I often see, is that the partners don't want to talk about that stuff or when they do start talking about, it the biological parent will say to the stepparent, "You shouldn't feel that way."

**Ron:** Essentially the message is, "You should feel the way I feel about our family. You should see things the way I see things," and we don't give each other the space to have our own unique posture or feelings or perspective about the family.

**Jayna:** Right. We either tell them they shouldn't feel that way, or we tell them that we don't want them to feel that way. The truth is, they're going to feel that way so we need to give them the space to do that and it needs to be okay.

**Ron:** Yes. Mike, it seems the one step beyond giving them permission and respecting their point of view is empathizing with the other's point of view.

**Mike:** It is.

I remember early in our marriage I was speaking to one of Jayna's daughters. For some reason, I just realized that, of course it wasn't just me. She had a biological father who is very important to her and still is. I definitely respect that role.

It was almost the situation of, "Okay, your dad is very important to you. I'm not trying to be your dad. I'm trying to be an active and hopefully positive influence in your life. I'd like to try to do as much as I can to make that relationship strong. But I'm not trying to replace anyone else."

Darling, you have this great line about the concept about, "If you make new friends—

**Jayna:** Oh, with friends

**Mike:** What was it? You say it better than I do.

**Jayna:** When I'm working with families I'll say to a kid, "When you go to school this year, will you make new friends?"

The child will say, "Yes, I'm going to. I've made some new friends."

I'll say, "Great! What about your old friends?"

They'll say, "I've got my old friends."

I'll say, "Okay, when you make your new friends, are you going to have to get rid of your old friends?"

"Well, no! I'm not going to get rid of my old friends!"

Then I say, "Why not?"

They say, "I've been friends with them for a long time."

I say, "Oh, so you can have old friends and new friends?"

"Well, yes, the more friends the better."

Then I will say, "Right, so it's the same thing with your biological mom and your stepmom."

**Mike:** The parenting relationships.

**Jayna:** They're not the same. You don't get rid of one because you add another.

**Ron:** Right.

**Jayna:** You can add new friends even though you have an old friend.

**Ron:** There's more than enough love points in your heart to give away. There's more than enough space. What's great about that is that it takes something that the child, in this case, is familiar with and generalizes it to a stepfamily relationship.

Those kinds of things are true in a lot of ways even for a parent and stepparent. Sometimes seeing it's kind of like—imagine the biological parent going, “Oh yeah, when I got married, I got a mother-in-law and a father-in-law. I don't love them the same way that my spouse loves them. Likewise, being a stepparent means you have a relationship with your family, with your stepchildren, but it's different than it is with the biological parent.

That's something I can relate to and understand, “Oh, that's what you've been trying to tell me.” Those sorts of connections, “Now I empathize with where you stand and how you experience my children and I can give you a little more grace. Now I'm not your enemy. Now I'm not against your point of view. I can come alongside your point of view.” That is a really good one.

Alright, good. Moving on.

Daily Practice: “Be intentional and plan your time—caveat, both with and without your children”

Do you think couples maybe plan one way more than the other and they don't really think it through on both ends?

**Mike:** I could definitely see that as the case. I know sometimes we've been guilty of that.

When we had our time with our children, a weekend with our kids or a week or what have you—a vacation, we were obviously thinking ahead and trying to plan that. But we found that it was very important to plan plenty of rest during the day, at least several hours during the day even if we were going to an amusement park or a water park or some big vacation to make sure to budget in time for that.

On the other side, too, it was important for Jayna and me to plan good time, our alone time together, well. We really enjoy spending time together. These last few months on the COVID thing, have been really—we've been together in the house and grateful to

say we're not driving each other crazy. I know that's not a 100 percent universal among couples but I'm grateful for that.

The idea here is that if you're in a situation where you're in a stepfamily and you've got these moments that you're planning with the kids, it's important to make sure that you're intentional when you're together alone.

If you want to both just collapse on the couch and watch television, that's fine, but make some—at least some indication to the other partner, “Is this what you really want to do? Will at this weekend we're together alone all we've watched are Netflix and what have you, is that—we look back at that weekend as being a good one?”

Sometimes the answer is, “Yes,” and that's fine but make sure you're together on that.

**Jayna:** A lot of the couples that I work with, the very first thing that goes when they get married is their time alone together.

**Ron:** Isn't that ironic, that it's almost exclusively time alone while they're dating, even to the point of not fully understanding the kids and the interaction of the kids and the adults. Then the wedding hits. Now all of a sudden it kind of flip flops.

**Mike:** Right.

**Jayna:** Right. I think that was another thing we learned from our first marriages, that we were not intentional about the time alone with our partner.

It was this whole piece around when we had our children, we focused on our children, we did kid activities, we did not go out on dates, we enjoyed that time with our children and we planned it. Every week or every two weeks we would sit down with our calendars; we would go over everything. This is also the way you integrate the stepparent in, so everybody's on the same page.

It's hard to be organized and structured when you're overwhelmed. But taking that time to do it is important. It's a skill. It's a muscle. It's like you start with one pound weights and you go to two pound weights and you go to five pound weights. If it doesn't come easy to you, you start somewhere but if you've not ever been organized before, start with the calendar. Both of you do it even if it kills you. [Laughter] Start with 10 minutes.

But we had our weekends together with the children fairly organized. We kind of had some structure to it and we would have bedtimes; put our kids to bed so we'd have alone time together in the evening. We kind of knew what the framework of the weekend was going to be together.

Then the same thing though when we did not have children. If you have children 24/7—

**Ron:** I want to drill down to that right there. I want to drill down to that because I know we've got somebody listening right now that they are lucky enough, blessed enough, graced enough, that they have natural compartmentalized time. The kids go to the other home or homes on the weekend or every other weekend, and you have a weekend to yourself as a couple. You kind of have this natural focus on one another.

There are lots of people listening right now that the calendar does not serve them in that way. They have kids 24/7 or their kids are at the other homes on different weekends so they always have somebody in the house.

Alright, how do you drill down and find couple time when it's your weekend with the children and you want that to be the best and the most it can be. But yet, you really feel divided. For noncustodial parents in particular, like, "Man, I got two and a half days. That's it. My kids go back to the other home, and you want to go on a date and spend half that whole evening? I want to be with my children."

That's a real conflict for some couples. They don't have a natural compartmentalized time to date. Should they still date?

**Jayna:** Yes, they should and here's why. Because you want to model for your children that your adult relationship is still important.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Mike:** From my perspective, you think about all the relationships in a home. You say you've got a just couple, three kids. Think of the relationships in pairs. There's the mother to the stepchild and the dad to his biological kid, and of all those pairs are related. There's a formula for how many those there are, right? But in my view the most important one or second to everyone's relationship to God is the relationship between the parents, the man and the woman, there.

I know we have worked to try that build our relationship and make that as strong as we can. Of course dating and scheduling is a part of that. The line I've heard is that—what's the word?—that children are profoundly deaf but they have perfect vision, right—that they can observed the parents working together in making time for the relationship with one another—they can see how important that is. A lot of the other relationships within the family will flow from that.

The other thing that I at least—I've focused on is trying to make sure we can model for our children what a good healthy relationship looks like so that hopefully in the future, when the children want to have their own relationships, marriages, so forth, they've at least had that opportunity to see something like that in action.

**Jayna:** I would also say that it's really only when the children are young. As the children get older once they hit 11-12 they're going to be naturally going to friend's houses and

going out and doing other things on their own independently. So it's really only when the children are in those early elementary-age years that you're going to maybe have get a sitter or they're going to be at friends' houses.

There are lots of way to do it painlessly. It doesn't have to be this big production of, "I'm going to get a sitter and go out with your stepparent." It doesn't have to be an all-day affair, but dinner and a show, 6pm to midnight. You don't have to do it every weekend. It can be twice a month but at *least* twice a month. I think it's important to go out and have date night.

**Ron:** Yes, this whole principle is not tied up in a dollar amount or even the amount of time. It is about showing priority to one another, honoring one another, investing in each other and modeling that for your kids.

**Jayna:** Mind that for your children, it's not, "This is more important than you are." It is, "This is as important in a different way."

The other thing is they also need to, a couple of times a year, go on a weekend trip. Almost always you can plan that around some sort of summer schedule when the child maybe goes to grandparents' house or maybe, once again, there's a way to plan that so it's something the child's looking forward to as well.

**Ron:** This next daily practice we've kind of already started talking around. It's, "Create structure and routines"

We've started talking about this from the standpoint of a date night and put the kids to bed and we're going to have some planned activities for the weekend. We're really talking about daily rituals of how we do life, routines of how we do life and traditions that the family develops.

What are some things that you guys did to try to develop those routines or traditions?

**Jayna:** A big one for us was actually bedtime. Bedtime is something that we think about for small children, but you know at the end of the day everybody's tired. But we also found as our children got older, they were still tired, and when kids are tired, they talk. A lot of people once their kids hit nine or ten, they send them up to bed. What we found was that when our children were with us, we would still go up and talk to them at the end of the evening.

Even when our kids were 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, we would still make a point of going up into their room and just checking in with them at night and talking with them and that those were wonderful—those were wonderful conversations and oftentimes the time when our children would talk to us about things they didn't have time to during the day.

**Ron:** That is strategic. It worked for you and your kids.

Don't just necessarily turn off parenting but find a little extra gas in the tank for at the end of the day.

**Jayna:** It's also a way to, if you've had a not good day or your child got upset with you about something, it's also a way to close out the day to say, "Listen, I know we had a hard day today, but I want you to know I love you."

Mike used to have this wonderful—you would do that thing where you would put your hand on their face and you'd get real close up to them. Do you remember? What would you say to them?

**Mike:** Just, "You're very sweet. I love you very much—so proud of you—so glad you're here." It was just such a sweet moment. It was very intimate and trying to really connect with the child in a way that made them know that I was there for them, that I was loving them and the most important thing for me was the relationship. That was very important to me.

**Ron:** One of the things we've talked about on this podcast and through our ministry here at FamilyLife Blended many times before is early on in a stepfamily journey, it's really important for biological parents to have those little moments where they reassure their child, "You haven't lost all of me. Yes, you've lost part of me but you haven't lost all of me. I'm still here for you."

You connect to the heart of the child, reassure them. I could see what you guys are talking about, that that's a sweet opportunity for each of you to connect with your biological children. Were there moments where that then shifted and you had opportunity to connect with stepchildren?

**Mike:** Yes! I know that for example I'm pretty handy. I like to go to Home Depot and Lowe's and these places and was able to do a lot of construction. I would take my kids, my biological kids—my two to Home Depot and just wander through—

**Jayna:** —run up and down the aisles.

**Mike:** They'd get inside the wash—

**Jayna:** Go stand in the showers

**Mike:** —stand in the showers and look at the window displays and all that kind of good stuff. That was fun. Then later of course, I had the opportunity to do that with Jayna's kids as well. It was just one more thing that I was able to hopefully bring into their life.

**Jayna:** Yes, that was kind of a ritual and tradition. Going to Home Depot costs you nothing. Running up and down the aisles cost you nothing. Watching the forklifts.

**Mike:** Running very carefully, Darling. Home Depot is dangerous.

**Ron:** Especially in the aisles with the nails and the hammers. [Laughter]

**Mike:** Exactly right.

**Ron:** No, but what a beautiful little tradition that's uniquely yours based, rooted in who you are as a man and in your interest. "Tag along with Dad," and you found a way to make it fun.

**Mike:** Yes, and I think that it doesn't have to be terribly sophisticated. One of the things that we did with the kids— [Laughter]

**Ron:** Obviously.

**Mike:** Should I say this?

**Jayna:** We've got more.

**Mike:** We've got plenty. We would go to the monster truck shows and the demolition derbies, very high brow entertainment, Ron, so you know—

**Ron:** Yes.

**Jayna:** It was so fun!

**Mike:** It was much fun. We'd of course have ear phones for all the kids. We put their names on the earphones so they would have you—

**Jayna:** We'd say, "Now, kids, your other parents may not understand this so just..." [Laughter]

**Mike:** It was complete fun and the kids loved it and great fun.

**Jayna:** We'd also go to car shows.

**Mike:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Jayna:** —which are very inexpensive to get into.

**Mike:** Yes, every year there's a—the new cars come out—the dealers in town will throw together a car show or what have you. You just go look at the new cars in a big space. In Houston, there's a big convention center here.

**Ron:** “Ooh and aah” over the new styles, yes.

**Mike:** That’s right. When my kids were little, then we’d say, “How many pickup truck beds can you crawl into and crawl out of?” [Laughter] There’d be dozens of pickup trucks out there. They’d be “Oh, I’ll get this one.”

Again, it’s harmless fun. They’re not going to get hurt. I’m standing right there.’

**Ron:** That is awesome.

**Mike:** The truck beds are there for kids to crawl in and out of.

**Jayna:** Yes, we’d also—we’d go out to Rice University—

**Mike:** —where I went to school.

**Jayna:** —and we’d run all the way around Rice. We’d take our bikes. We’d go hang out in the fountain, get wet in the summers.

**Ron:** “Find your fun”—I mean that’s the message here: “Find your fun and build some memories together.”

Okay, moving on.

Daily practice number next, whatever it is: “Be a detective of your spouse”

**Mike:** Yes, this is fun because it’s so easy for one spouse to look at what the other one does and just sort of pooh-pooh it or denigrate it or however you want to say it. God made us different for reasons, right?

There’s so many womanly things about Jayna that I love and manly things about me that I think she appreciates, but we are different.

One of the things that I have enjoyed doing is trying to find ways to help her be more of what she is and encourage her in the gifts and the differences that she has. She’s a woman. She has these great female instincts and just wonderful to watch. For me, it’s like being a detective of your spouse means asking questions, “Darling why do you do that? I’m curious about this.”

Try not to ask the question in a tone of, “Why the heck do you do that?” But really try to do so in a way that you’re really trying to sincerely solicit and elicit information about what’s happening there.

**Jayna:** There are reasons why everybody does everything; like, why people load the dishwasher a certain way, why a man likes to watch a certain show, why Mike wants to go to Home Depot at 4:30 on a Sunday afternoon—

**Ron:** Right.

**Mike:** Just wander around.

**Jayna:** —why bags of cement make his blue eyes light up. The thing is I'm just glad they make his eyes light up, right?

We give each other a hard time in relationships about the things that make one another happy sometimes. I think it's weird. I remember him coming home from some business meeting and he said, "My friend was talking about how his new wife always had to order popcorn at the movies and it was such a pain for him."

I remember saying, "Why would your friend care? Why wouldn't he just be delighted that his wife liked popcorn and make a big deal about going and getting her popcorn? It's easy points, right?" [Laughter]

There are things about our partners that really bug us. But rather than letting them bug us, why don't we just go, "Okay, that's the way my partner is," and be respectful. It's not all that hard.

Unless these things are abusive or unless these things are dangerous or unless these things are difficult, most of the time these are just different than we are. Some of these things are about being a man and being a woman and how we do things. Putting on makeup or whatever, but a lot of these things are just things that provide us comfort or things that we do differently.

**Ron:** That question, "What is this telling me about him or her?" is a great intriguing question. It just changes your point of view from, "Boy, that is irritating," to "Huh, what am I learning about this other person?"

Man, that's good.

**Mike:** I like the way you think because, again, I really do like learning in general about a lot of the different things. I think that one of the things—something that helped Jayna and me as we started our second marriage was, "What did we learn from our life's journeys up to this point?" Because I feel like so many people will go into a second marriage with just, "Okay, this is what it is. I'm going to do the same thing I did before."

**Ron:** "I married a better person this time. It's all going to work out."

**Mike:** “I’m in a different zip code,” or whatever it is. The thing is is that unless you learn about your partner and yourself and try to use those learnings in some way in your relationship, you’re really not going to go anywhere.

**Jayna:** I mean, Mike and I were heartbroken when we got divorced.

**Mike:** We did. We were.

**Jayna:** We just did not want to do it the same.

**Ron:** Yes, and that’s a good motivation. But what I hear you saying is use that motivation and channel it into learning, into growing, into walking with God, and saying, “Lord, what do I need to learn from this? What do I take away?” and “How do I move forward?”

I think that willingness—we just moved into our next daily practice: “A willingness to be wrong” is what you guys say.

I think it’s rooted in this humility about ourselves. Even coming out of the previous relationship, “What do I need to learn about me so I can move into this new”—and you carry that humility with you right into the new marriage. Be willing to be wrong and say, “I’m sorry.”

**Jayna:** Is it John Kabat-Zinn? Is that how you say it?

**Ron:** I’m not sure. We’ll go with that.

**Jayna:** Is he the one that says, “Wherever you go, there you are.”

**Ron:** [Laughter] Yes, and, “You’ve taken yourself to this point in time. Now deal with you.”

**Jayna:** Right, right. The thing is, you have to do it with a lot of compassion and grace. Like, if I have a friend and my friend has all these problems, I will say, “I am so sorry. It’s okay. You’ve done the best that you could. You did the best you could where you were. It’s okay,” right? But if I am talking to myself about the things I’ve done I will be so hard on myself. I will kick myself. I will feel guilty. I will feel horrible, right?

We are so much more gracious and loving and compassionate with other people than generally we are ourselves. I do think that part of the willing to be wrong is also having grace and compassion for yourself. I think part of being a Christian is understanding that we can—it’s okay to do that.

**Ron:** There you go. God is grace and truth. He's the epitome of both of those and we need both of those. To shame myself is one thing. To say, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute, Ron, You're not such a bad person."

I don't have to beat myself up in every way because of my failings or my mistakes but I do need truth. I do need God's compass to go, "Now, Ron, here's where you were off." That's an important piece. We have a lot of people walking around the world who just do the "Do you, be you and whoever you is, is fine and that is your truth."

That's not true. There is an objective truth that comes from God. He is the One who tells us where true north is. Without the truth, we don't get any perspective about the grace that we give ourselves. We don't—we're not really able to grow into what is true about us and about relationships and now I think this is great. We need both of those things.

**Mike:** Right.

**Jayna:** Right. You have to have both. Then you have to honor where you've been. You have to honor the mistakes that you made and you have to honor the truth that you come to so that you can move forward. Because the honoring of all of these pieces is how you move forward.

**Ron:** We've got two more suggestions. One of them has to do with sex.

"Be open to having sex regularly and often," you say. Why is that?

**Jayna:** Because it's hard to be mad at somebody if you have sex regularly and often. [Laughter] I mean if you—when you are together and when you are open to connecting with that person and being with that person on that level—

**Ron:** —it softens your heart, doesn't it?

**Mike:** It really does.

**Jayna:** It softens your heart. It makes you not want to fight. It helps you to see past what's happening and know that their intention is positive.

**Mike:** It also highlights the differences between us in how I can be strong and tough and she can be soft and sweet. I'm not trying to make her be harder and she's trying to make me be softer, in a sense, in that regard. It's just one more physical manifestation of that in a sense.

What it means to me is just one more level of good connection with your spouse, right? In many ways I think that the relationship that I have with Jayna, and I think I would encourage many men to have this with their own spouses, is that the more that you love

your spouse—it's like a mirror to a large degree—the more you love, the more you'll get back and you'll try to make that connection stronger in so many different ways.

To me, the intimacy is a big part of that. It's really something that's important to us. I think that if you can find a way to make that mirroring more regular, it's like a virtuous cycle, right? The more love I give her the more love she gives back to me. Soon it's where we're in a place where I couldn't imagine having been, as far as happiness satisfaction with my marriage, and my relationship with my lovely wife.

That's something that has really kept us going these last couple of decades for sure. It's just one very specific area that, of course, we have privacy, fidelity and time that we can use. It's just the most wonderful way we can use that is having a great intimate relationship.

**Ron:** Yes, it's so important to a relationship. It feeds the relationship in some very unique ways. Then when sex is absent, it really drains from the relationship. It really steals that sense of togetherness and as you said, "fidelity". You're not celebrating your-ness in the same way anymore.

As you were talking, I had a thought. I've heard a lot of people say, "Sex is a barometer of your relationship. If your relationship outside the bedroom's not going well, your sex inside the bedroom tends to reflect that."

I've also found a different dynamic at play with a lot of couples that I've worked with through the years is outside the bedroom they're fighting, not getting along, and they don't like each other but they have good sex. Often when I chase that, what I find is inside the bedroom they approach one another with surrender, with sacrifice, "I'm not here to get pleasure out of you. I'm here to share pleasure with you, to serve you, to connect with you," and that attitude they need to learn how to take outside the bedroom.

There's a resilience they have inside their sexual life that they don't have outside. When they bring surrender outside the bedroom, when they bring sacrifice, "It's not about me. It's not about my happiness. It's about how I serve us and you and celebrate you before the Lord," all of a sudden, they're making love outside the bedroom just like they were making love inside the bedroom. That adds to the sweetness of their relationship.

**Mike:** It really does. I keep going back to the analogy of the mirror. I just love to—I love to look at Jayna. I think she's very beautiful. The more that I look at her beauty, the more beautiful I think she is, and of course, then the more beautiful she becomes to me. It's a, as I said, very much a virtuous cycle and sex is a part of that.

There's this song lyric. I think it's a Don Henley song. It says, "Don't you know women are the only works of art?" I found that to be really powerful in that sense. I'm really grateful to be with a woman. Really men in general need to be a lot more grateful to be

with a woman when they are with a woman because it's just such a special and wonderful thing.

What's worked for me is to try to lead in that area. Step out first, love your woman more, and then not make it all transactional, in a sense, but try to love her in advance and again that will flow back to you.

**Ron:** That is a good word.

We've got one more and we're really turning a corner now talking about former spouses.

Daily practice, weekly practice: "Limit your discussions about your former spouses when you're alone together as a couple".

What's the danger if couples find themselves talking about what's going on with the exes and co-parenting when they finally get their alone time?

**Mike:** We've all been to the sort of gathering of a few couples get together for dinner someplace. At some point in the evening it seems like the women go off in one area and the men go off. It's like there's all this bashing of the other sex going on, you know?

I think that's another part that can carry over into the conversations that a married—second married couple can have, right? Oh, it's not only the fact that my ex is doing all these nasty things but it's because he's a man or woman or whatever it is—just to try and find those differences. It's an important one.

**Ron:** You're saying as husband and wife you can start commiserating about your former spouse and it's just this pseudo connection where you're just bashing that other person. They're an easy target.

**Mike:** But it's a dead end. It's a not a positive place to go, at least in my view. There may be moments when you will need to talk about these things, you're planning the summer schedule or there's some sort of family court issue or there's some other issue that's going on that's pretty important that you will need to talk to your spouse about your exes but we try to ring-fence that as best you can. We're going to talk about this for half an hour then we're going to move on.

**Jayna:** The deal with exes is all of this is a slippery slope. When you're alone together it's part of that ritual tradition piece. Talking about your exes when you're alone together ends up being a time suck. It's just too easy to start talking about it and have it become a fight or have it become a larger discussion.

A lot of the couples that I work with have family lawsuits and things like that. When you end up being in family court, and Mike ended up being in family court a couple of times,

it'll take over your whole life. We had to get very careful very quickly or that was just going to take over everything.

**Ron:** How did you do that practically? Mike just said put time limits on it, put some boundaries around it.

**Jayna:** Thirty minutes or five minutes or ten minutes and just say, "Okay, twice a week we're going to talk about this for twenty minutes and that's it." Because what will happen is you'll just talk about it every evening and it'll just—

**Mike:** —it will start to blur together. It'll start to push out the quality time you want to have with your spouse.

**Ron:** Oh, that's a good word.

**Mike:** I think that to me was a real, as Jayna said, a slippery slope we seem to be heading down.

**Jayna:** It's just too easy for it to happen. Sometimes one of the partners will be like, "No, no, I want to keep talking," and you just got to say, "No, we're just going to go on. We're going to have a lovely dinner. We're going to move forward." You just have to make the agreement because otherwise you'll spend the whole evening on that.

**Ron:** Last question. We've got somebody listening right now and they are in the throes of kids and chasing them around and doing life and teenagers with their own agendas and schedules and activities. You guys have made it to empty nest. What word of hope— [Laughter] if you guys could see Jayna right now, she's lifting her hands in celebration—what word of hope would you offer to somebody in that situation?

In a moment you'll hear Mike's response to my question for younger couples about holding on to hope as they reach for the empty nest years.

You've been listening to my conversation with Mike and Jayna Haney. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

As I spoke with the Haney's, I couldn't help but think about one of our resources. It's a book and small group study called *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*. Now a lot like the conversation we had together, it explores the qualities of strong stable, healthy blended-family marriages. It's based on one of the largest surveys ever done of step-couple relationships. I think it's a great compliment to today's podcast that you've just listened to and offers an online profile that gives you great insight into how you can grow your marriage specifically.

You can find information about that and other books in the Smart Stepfamily series at [shop.familylife.com](http://shop.familylife.com). That's [shop.familylife.com](http://shop.familylife.com) or wherever you buy your books online.

There is a free, emphasis on the word free, 13-week small group study. That's available through FamilyLife only. The show notes will tell you how to get that.

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Hey, we love your feedback so if you don't mind take a minute, write us a quick review and rate the program and then share this with a friend.

Speaking of impacting others, your marriage can be on mission. Maybe you haven't thought of it that way but we think it can be on mission. Each fall we put on the *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. It's an equipping conference that helps lay leaders, couples, individuals, pastors alike understand more about stepfamily living and what you can do and what your church can do to impact others.

We'd love to have you join us October 1 and 2, 2020, for our next conference event. It's a live stream event this year so you don't have to travel. Just stay home and stay safe. You can learn all about that in the show notes as well.

FamilyLife Blended is the leading resource for stepfamilies around the world. We have the largest collection of articles and videos, books, podcasts and resources for families including my Smart Stepfamily series of books and curriculum. Again, go to the show notes and you can learn how you can find out more about us and about those resources.

Now, before we're done, a final word to couples with children still at home about holding on for the empty nest years.

**Mike:** We did the best we could with the information that we had at the time. We made the best decisions that we could. I know we made mistakes. We can look back and say, "We did the best we could. We learned as much as we could about the process of raising children and we've taught them as much as we have."

We hope that they will take those lessons and move into their futures. Of course, we'll be their balcony people cheering them on as they go through life as well. But we know

it's hard. I can definitely remember those times being so stressed and tired and frustrated. There's a country western song though that says, "You're going to miss this." [Laughter]

**Ron:** No I won't. [Laughter] I can hear somebody saying, "No, I won't."

**Jayna:** And that's okay too.

**Mike:** There will be parts of it that you'll miss, right? Again, try to revel in the moment as best you can. Be intentional about taking the moments of each day that are positive and sweet and kind and then try to hold on to those.

**Ron:** Next time, we'll hear from my friends, long time stepfamily educators, Gordon and Carrie Taylor about the unique complexities of grand parenting in blended families.

**Carrie:** The whole family got together including her ex and one of her grandchildren came up to her and said, Grandma, Grandma, I want you to meet one of my grandparents, and she took her over and introduced her to her ex-husband.

**Ron:** That's Gordon and Carrie Taylor, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible.

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