

MONA: Have you ever wondered, "How am I going to keep this family together when I'm on the road all the time?" Did you know that divorce rates for truckers is 19 to 27 percent and it's highest in high-turnover jobs like trucking? In a minute I'm going to talk about this and more with a truck driver and his wife of 34 years. Welcome to "Health on the Highway" podcast series. I'm Dr. Mona Shattell, your host. Today's guests are Bob and Chris Stanton. Bob is an over-the-road driver who's been driving long-haul for more than 15 years. He is co-coordinator for Trucker for a Cause, a support group for truck drivers under treatment for obstructive sleep apnea. He's an advocate for drivers, especially drivers with sleep apnea and other DOT medical care issues. Bob received a CDL in 2000 and has been driving since that time minus a two-year stint in management for a large carrier. He is co-author on a paper in the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine. Bob's wife, Chris Stanton, is also here. Chris is a tax accountant who works part-time except during tax season when she works a schedule more like a driver's. Bob and Chris have three adult children, two of whom are still at home. Bob and Chris have been married for 34 years. So what are the biggest challenges, maybe starting-- either Bob or Chris-- from being apart from, Bob, you being on the road all the time and, Chris, you being at home?

BOB: Chris, why don't you go first?

CHRIS: The biggest challenge I think is not-- is not being-- his not being here for events, one, and for unexpected life events that happen.

MONA: Bob, I imagine that's also true for you?

BOB: Yeah, 'cause the-- when those unexpected life events happen, being stuck halfway across the country and not being able to do anything to help, all I can do is sit in the truck and worry. Makes it even worse.

MONA: Right. What do you do to keep yourself from worrying or to-- to help Chris from a distance?

BOB: I'm-- I'm a big "catastrophizer" to start with, so I have to work at that and I try to take planning steps to sort of be ready for, you know, the problem of events as best we can. At least that's my approach.

MONA: Can you give us an example maybe of something that's happened and how you had-- how you had to deal with it?

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BOB: Well, one of-- one of my nightmare scenarios is dying in the sleeper berth while I'm away from home and there are-- I've unfortunately worked with, you know, Last Ride Home getting passed-away drivers' remains home. So there is a letter in my-- with my pastor which gives the contact numbers for a lot of my truck driver friends that will-- you know, that have done Last Ride Homes before. So that's just one less thing I catastrophize about is Chris dealing with getting me home if I'm passed away.

MONA: Wow.

CHRIS: I think she was talking about something that happened though, with us that-- when our daughter had to be hospitalized when she was in college and I had to basically drop everything and-- and-- and go to Michigan and Bob was-- was stuck somewhere. I can't remember where you were at the time.

BOB: I was in New Hampshire in a blizzard.

CHRIS: Yeah, and-- yeah because it was wintertime and, you know, the only thing you can do is communicate. 'Cause, I mean, he was literally stuck. He couldn't move. And-- and I had to, you know, drive to Michigan and the best thing and really the only thing you could do is-- is communicate. So you know, thank God for cell phones.

MONA: Oh, right, I mean, now it's a lot easier.

CHRIS: I don't know what people would-- you know, would have done 20 years ago, but you know, so we talked. I mean obviously we talked and he-- the one thing he could do while he was-- was stuck was go on the Internet and try and work out the-- the insurance issues and he did call the insurance company and make sure she was covered where she was at and blah blah blah and that kind of stuff. So that was very helpful.

MONA: Great.

CHRIS: And again, you know, we were able to talk on the phone so it was okay and work out our-- the issues of finance.

MONA: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm sure that was really helpful.

CHRIS: Yeah.

MONA: Yeah, I know support is really important for families at home. You know, do you-- do you have family nearby or-- to-- to help with other problems as they arise or for support?

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CHRIS: We have-- we have-- we have family in the area, thank heavens, and they-- they've been great through the years. From time to time we've had other issues and-- and you know, thank goodness we had family, we have a church and friends and you know, that's definitely something that needs to be cultivated and everyone needs. Everyone needs a support group of some sort.

MONA: It's really important for everybody, especially for wives, husbands, partners who are-- who are home and drivers who are on the road all the time. So I'm hoping this is helpful to drivers, to their families. Shout out to Progressive Commercial for bringing this programming to the listeners. Communication is really important. Support is-- is important. What can you say about those times when you're apart and either there-- there's something difficult going on that you-- you don't really want to have the conversation over the phone but then, you know, when-- when-- Bob, when you're home you might only be home a couple of days and maybe neither of you want to fight. How do you deal with-- you know, this happens in every relationship but I think there's especially some challenges-- you know, with drivers that are away and family members who are home. What can you say about that?

CHRIS: Boy, that's a tough one I think because like you said, you don't really want to fight over the phone or have this intense discussion over the phone, but then again, when he comes home, you don't want to ruin the two, three days that he's home by having a not-nice discussion of course.

MONA: [overlapping] Right.

CHRIS: That is tough and I-- I don't think I have any great words of wisdom in this case because Bob and I have both ignored it or avoided it, conversation that we need to have and then eventually, it blows up on you. You know, at some point it's gonna hit the fan.

BOB: Yeah.

CHRIS: I think-- I guess the answer is to set aside a time and say, okay, we need to talk about this and try and sit down and have, you know a-- a calm conversation about it.

MONA: Mm-hmm. I had Dr. Karen Heaton on talking about sleep and-- and this-- this came up in our podcast, and she said that she-- and her husband's a driver. And she said that she tries not to have difficult conversations at the end of the day when she's talking to her husband who's on the road. So she's found that to be helpful you know, don't bring up anything distressful you know, at the end of the day.

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BOB: I will agree with that and I-- we-- we have-- we now have a sort of a schedule where I try to call her either before she leaves for work where I can talk to her while she's driving to work in the morning because I know I'm pretty grumpy once I'm real sleepy and tired. So if we do have a conversation we need to have on the phone, I'm less likely to go off-- go off the deep end earlier in the day.

MONA: So you two have figured that out.

BOB: It also just happens to be practical for us because you know, it-- it works best if-- you know, I'm not trying-- you know, I can talk a lot while I'm on the road driving with a headset on but she doesn't have as much time to talk. So it's a matter of what's a good schedule for her.

MONA: Right. Speaking of schedule like, when you're home Bob and Chris, when Bob is home, you know, I've heard from other drivers that-- and drivers' families that it's best not to schedule anything the first day they're back because they sleep-- you know, sleep a lot, tired. Do you do that? Do you two try to save that first day for-- for nothing?

CHRIS: Yeah, well, plus he might not get home.

MONA: Oh, tight, right. That's right. Yeah.

CHRIS: But yeah--

BOB: Yes, that's the one piece of advice I would give any long-haul driver-- never schedule a family event the first day of your scheduled time at home because Murphy is alive and well.

MONA: Right.

BOB: If you've got a special event, you won't be home on time for it.

MONA: Right.

BOB: It'll snow, you'll blow a tire, you name it.

MONA: Anything, Bob or Chris, you could say about young drivers or drivers and their families who are-- who are new to the industry, new to the position, new to the lifestyle? Anything you can tell them about keeping the family together?

CHRIS: Well, cell phones are key. I mean, I don't know, like I said, how you do it without because you've got to talk to each other. You're leaving your spouse at

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home to deal with everything to go out and provide for them. I mean, on the one hand, you know, the one spouse is out making money so that the family can live comfortably, hopefully.

MONA: Right.

CHRIS: But on the other hand, the other spouse is dealing with everything else, everything else that a family deals with.

MONA: Right.

CHRIS: You've got to be able to talk to each other. And you've got to, you know, put it in perspective. Yes, he's gone and the-- and--or she's gone [unknown]. But they are doing what needs to be done. So you need to, you know, try and keep that perspective and keep a sense of humor. [laughs] At the end of the day you know, a lot of these little tragedies are just forgotten in a week or two but keep your sense of humor.

MONA: That's great. And that's great advice. You, Bob, you have anything to add to that?

BOB: One of the things I've found is after being on the road for a few years, I pretty much lost any of my friends because I wasn't home enough to maintain the friendships and relationships. So for the last couple of years I've actually worked pretty hard at trying to develop some new friendships with another driver, a guy named Gary.

MONA: Yeah.

BOB: And that's helped me because it gives me another driver I can vent about the truck-driving frustrations...

MONA: Mm-hmm, and there are many.

BOB: [overlapping] that Chris hears all the time and probably gets tired of listening to me about. But Gary is another driver and I can vent to him. So I would just say, try to-- you know, for the drivers, try to work hard at maintaining friendships.

MONA: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up. That really is really important. You know, it doesn't come easy for-- for drivers who are away, but it's super important and especially with other drivers who understand what it's like. Another shout out for Progressive Commercial for really supporting this program, "Health on the Highway." Thanks Bob and Chris. I appreciate you being with me on the show today.

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CHRIS: Thank you, Mona. We appreciate you listening to us.

BOB: [overlapping] Yeah, thanks Mona. Hopefully we helped.

MONA: You did, you did. Thank you.

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