

parenting matters

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING A STRONG COUPLE RELATIONSHIP DURING STRESSFUL TIMES



By Dewie Weiner, LICSW, ACSW

By Dewie Weiner, LICSW, ACSW

Stress. So many factors contribute: economic uncertainty, illness, (un)employment, childrearing, elderly parents, academic pressure, retirement... Even "happy" occasions such as planning a wedding involve stress. Stress is a natural part of living and impossible to avoid. As a couple's therapist, I have found that how a couple deals with stress can make a tremendous difference in the quality of their relationship. We are taught to take care of our physical health by eating healthfully, sleeping regularly and exercising. Likewise, our relationships need attentive maintenance in order to function optimally. I believe that it is a myth that stress necessarily interferes with closeness. Many couples I have seen have actually increased their capacity for intimacy during stressful times. Below are some recommendations for nurturing your relationship at all times, but they are particularly relevant during stressful times.

- **Of all the people in the world,** your partner is whom you chose to be with. Remind yourself why. Ironically, the very traits that irritate you about your partner under duress may be tied to reasons you chose to be with that person initially. For example, you fell in love with his free-spiritedness, but now you view his behavior as undisciplined. You admired her strong sense of responsibility, but now you feel controlled. You have a choice about how you perceive your partner. Fighting can

function as a stress-buster, creating a distraction from your real concerns, but it isn't helpful for your relationship. Keep in mind that you are on the same team. Try to bond together around a shared frustration.

- **Practice good communication skills.** Learn to identify your own needs and communicate them clearly. Ask for what you need specifically— in behavioral, accomplishable terms. Using statements that begin with "I", speak directly and clearly about your experience from your own perspective. Don't expect your partner to read your mind, and take time to inquire about what your partner needs. Find out what your partner is looking for in communicating with you. Is he/she looking for advice, suggestions, or just a chance to vent? Sometimes being a good listener is the best help you can give. If you're unsure whether or not to say something, think about what you want to accomplish, and whether saying it will move you closer to that goal.

- **When you do fight. Fight fairly.** You don't have to agree on everything, but that doesn't necessarily mean that one of you is "wrong." Conflict can be managed if both partners attempt to handle disagreements with tolerance and respect, rather than competition and contempt. Avoid blaming and over-generalizing. Don't say, "You never..." or "You always..." Avoid criticizing and giving unsolicited advice. If an argument goes nowhere, take a time out, and agree to return to the discussion at a specified later date. Don't try to change your partner; it will only make him or her feel criticized and defensive. The only person you can change is yourself. Compromise and agree to disagree. Flexibility is really important during hard times. Finally, when you make a mistake, repair the damage. It can be hard to do, but you didn't mean to hurt the other person and you are not a bad person. Acknowledging that you missed the mark and apologizing for any hurt you caused can go a long way toward healing. None of us are perfect, and mistakes are opportunities to grow. So learn to forgive yourself and forgive each other.

- **Balance the needs of the** individuals with the needs of the couple. Each couple has a unique rhythm of time

together and time apart. Particularly during stressful times, it is important to be sensitive to your own and your partner's requirements for togetherness and space. It is not possible to get all your needs filled in one relationship. Look elsewhere for support and relief so that you don't overburden the relationship with too many intimacy requests during times when you are both drained and exhausted. Timing is important. Schedule specific times to address stressful concerns, and limit your stressful discussions to those times. Try not to raise upsetting issues when the other person is walking out the door, falling asleep or otherwise unavailable to engage

- **Plan fun times.** Give yourselves something to look forward to. If stressors are ongoing, schedule breaks. Know your own limits. Don't martyr yourself. You don't want to engender guilt in an overwhelmed partner because he/she can't live up to impossible standards. During stressful times, people can become worn out. Often, there is little left over to give. This is no one's fault. Sometimes a small gesture can go a long way toward maintaining the intimacy connection. When life feels overwhelming, people often feel stymied about how to be helpful to their partners. Compliment each other. Write a love letter to your partner. Give each other a secret gift once a week. Take turns, every other day, making one small intimacy request of each other. The request should be something small, easy to fill, and not involve any contentious areas in your relationship. By giving your partner and opportunity to be helpful to you, you are giving him/her a gift as well. Do something that you used to enjoy together that you stopped doing. If you can't afford something time-wise or financially, create a wish list—things to save or plan for in the future.

- **Keep things in perspective; try not** to think of things in black and white and take a long term view. Often, during the most painful times, there are unexpected bright moments. After a husband was laid off from his job six months ago, one couple handled the stress of financial uncertainty by reminding themselves that he no longer has to commute two hours every day to a job he didn't like, and also that they now have had much more time

to enjoy each other. Learn to recognize those opportunities and appreciate them. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, it helps to break tasks down into manageable steps. What is one small thing that you can do today to help yourself feel better?

- **Be positive. Even if you feel** hopeless, tired and irritable, try to be constructive. Research has shown that the act of smiling can actually make people feel happier. Your thoughts create your moods. Imagine pleasant thoughts. Good moods are contagious, so this can help your partner's outlook as well. Maintain your sense of humor. One couple dealt with the stress of caring for an aging parent by singing silly songs together: "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life," "Happy Talk Keep Talking Happy Talk," and "Whenever I Feel Afraid." They developed this funny routine to offset their anxious worrying. During stressful times, it's important to remember that you and your partner are different people. You and your partner may use different coping strategies. Often, people become more of who they are during difficult times. Know your partner's coping strategies and recognize their increase as a sign that your partner is having a hard time. This is a time when your partner needs support and understanding, not criticism. Keep in mind what's worked for you in the past and repeat it. Good luck, breathe, and as the saying goes, "this too shall pass."

Recommended reading:

[The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#), by John M. Gottman
[The New Rules of Marriage](#) by Terrance Real

Dewie Weiner, LICSW, ACSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Lexington with over 30 years of experience working with children, adults and couples. She holds a master's degree in clinical social work from Columbia University, has worked in the child psychiatry department of New England Medical Center, and has been on the faculty of Harvard and Tufts University Schools of Medicine. She has expertise with couples and blended families. Ms. Weiner serves on the Lexington Youth Services Council and can be reached at 781-861-7585.

Parenting Matters columns are not intended as a substitute for therapy. If your child is experiencing problems, seek help from your pediatrician, clinical social worker, child psychologist or psychiatrist.