

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model:

*Core Teaching Concepts for
Relationship and Marriage
Enrichment Programming*



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The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model:

Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming

EDITORS

Ted G. Futris, Ph.D., CFLE

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist
Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE

Professor and Extension Specialist
Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

The following working group members from the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) contributed to the development of this publication:

Andrew Behnke, Ph.D., CFLE

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
North Carolina State University

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
North Dakota State University

Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
Utah State University

H. Wallace Goddard, Ph.D., CFLE

Professor and Extension Specialist,
University of Arkansas

Jennifer Kerpelman, Ph.D.

Associate Dean and Professor, Auburn University

James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
University of Arkansas

Anthony Santiago, Ph.D.

Extension Specialist, Iowa State University

David Schramm, Ph.D., CFLE

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
University of Missouri

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE

Professor and Extension Specialist,
Kansas State University

Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.

Professor and Extension Specialist,
Utah State University

Kelly Warzinik, M.S.

Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training
(HRMET) Project Manager, University of Missouri

Angela Wiley, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist,
University of Illinois

*Also, thank you to the following Graduate Research Assistants
for their support with chapter development and editing:*

Allen Barton, University of Georgia

Mallory Lucier-Greer, Auburn University

Jeneé Duncan, University of Georgia

Evin Winkelman Richardson, University of Georgia

Copy editing by Andrea Gonzalez, Associate Editor, University of Georgia.

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The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) envisions a nationwide outreach through Extension specialists and educators in partnership with agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels that supports individuals and couples preparing for, developing, and enriching healthy relationships and healthy marriages. NERMEN's mission is to *provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice of relationship and marriage education. To learn more about NERMEN and additional resources from Cooperative Extension, visit www.nermen.org.*

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The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: *Linking Research to Relationship and Marriage Education*

Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University

NERMEM Overview

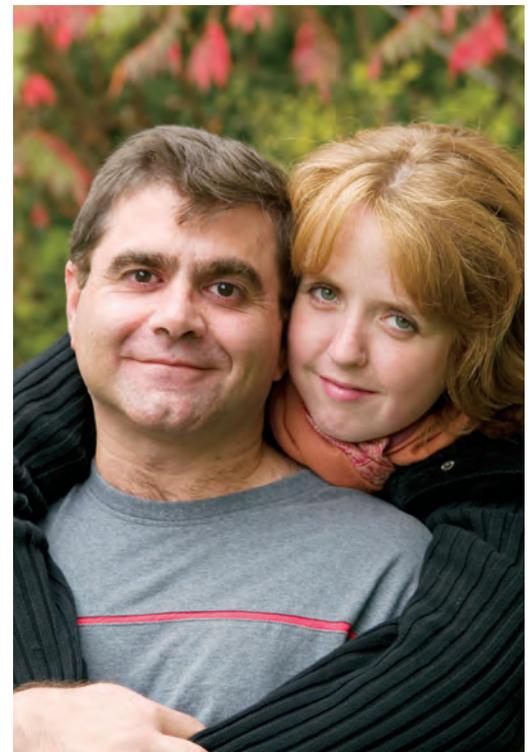
- **Choose** – Making intentional relationship choices
- **Care for Self** – Maintaining physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual wellness
- **Know** – Maintaining knowledge of your partner's world
- **Care** – Using nurturing, caring and affectionate behaviors
- **Share** – Developing and maintaining a couple identity
- **Manage** – Dealing with differences in healthy ways
- **Connect** – Engaging in a positive social network of support

Introduction

During the past two decades, research on couple and marital relationships has significantly informed our understanding of what makes relationships “work” (i.e., relationships that are satisfying and stable) (e.g. Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2010). While couples can interact in a variety of ways and consider themselves in healthy relationships, there emerges from research overarching patterns of interactions that seem to be fundamental to forging healthy relationships over the long term. As couples seek to share their lives with each other, understanding these recommended practices can help them build and maintain healthy and satisfying relationships. Research on the patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy couple relationships and marriages exists to guide the development of empirically informed program content (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). A team of researchers and practitioners – the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (www.nermen.org) – built on this early work to summarize the extant literature on predictors of marital quality, and methodically reviewed and organized this information to develop a framework or model for ensuring an empirical basis to community-based relationship and marriage education (RME) programs. The purpose of this publication is to share that research and those recommended core relationship practices with practitioners who offer RME.

Research-Based RME

The model presented here is “research-based;” that is, the components are derived from existing research on couples and serves to inform best practices for RME implementation. This work differs from efforts to develop “evidence-based” RME programs that involve implementing and assessing the impact of specific RME programs



and curricula. Definitions of “evidence-based” programs and criteria for utilizing this term have been established by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (see Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2009). A growing body of literature has emerged that focuses on the evaluation of RME programs for youth and adults and assessment of outcomes and evidence of efficacy:

- Youth-focused relationship education has been shown to help adolescents better understand the differences between healthy versus unhealthy relationships, develop positive attitudes about relationships and marriage, and acquire the skills needed to maintain safe and healthy dating relationships (Antle et al., 2011; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004; Kerpelman et al., 2009). In turn, youth participating in these programs report maintaining more positive relationships with others, including dating partners (Gardner & Boellard, 2007). These positive program effects have been found across diverse groups of youth and sustained for one year (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Kerpelman et al., 2010).
- Research evaluating relationship education for unmarried adults has also demonstrated positive changes in the attitudes and practices of engaged couples (Barton, Futris, & Bradley, 2012; Carroll & Doherty, 2003) and relationship quality improvements over-time (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). These programs have been demonstrated to help unmarried military soldiers (Van Epp, et al., 2008), parents (Adler-Baeder, Calligas et al., 2013) and low-resource individuals and couples (Antle, Sar et al., 2013; Wilde & Doherty, 2013).
- Married couples who participate in RME also show significant improvements in how they interact with each other (Blanchard et al., 2009) and in their reports of overall marital quality (Hawkins et al., 2008). Research has also documented some positive effects of RME on re-married couples in stepfamilies (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012).

It is important to understand that the focus, content, and delivery of the RME programs evaluated, as well as the methods and study design vary. Still, there is general consensus that benefits and positive outcomes are experienced in the short-term, on average, by youth and adult RME participants. More recently, the focus of research evaluating these programs is shifting towards better understanding the differing trajectories of change over a longer period of time as studies increasingly include samples that are more diverse than in previous years (Hawkins et al., 2010). Scholars are calling for future



Why Healthy Relationships Matter to Parenting and Child Well-Being

The research is clear: healthy relationships, and resulting family stability, promote the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children (Adler-Baeder, Shirer & Bradford, 2007):

- *Healthy relationships, healthy adults.* On average, those in healthy relationships are healthier and live longer. They have comparatively lower stress levels, exhibit better health habits and practices, are more stable emotionally, and have lower incidence of mental health issues. Individuals in healthy, stable relationships also tend to be more financially stable.
- *Healthy couples, healthy children.* On average, children growing up in a home in which there is a healthy, stable couple relationship have fewer emotional and behavioral problems, perform better in school, and are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (e.g., early/risky sexual activity, criminal activity, abuse of drugs and alcohol).
- *Linking couple relationships, parenting and child outcomes.* Importantly, the quality of the couple relationship influences parenting practices, regardless of family structure. Thus, when couples (or unmarried co-parents) maintain positive relationships with each other, they tend to engage with their children in more positive ways, which in turn positively impacts child outcomes.

Look for more information in each chapter about how the NERMEM principles promote positive parenting practices.

evaluation studies that consider multiple contextual factors that may influence program effectiveness and impact, and increased efforts to move towards evidence-based models of best practice for diverse populations (e.g., Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

The chapters that follow explicate the research-based core relationship principles and skills considered essential and applicable to individuals in various relationship forms and at various development stages. As well, recognizing the diversity in how couples from various socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups interact within relationships and marriages, each chapter offers *cultural considerations* to help practitioners be mindful of the application of each concept with diverse audiences (for more information on working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences, see Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). In addition, youth development research should be considered in efforts to offer developmentally appropriate relationship skills to youth. As such, each chapter also features recommendations for applying the concepts reviewed when *working with youth* (for more information on youth-focused relationship education, see Kerpelman, 2007).

Theoretical Grounding of RME

The model presented here is also grounded, both explicitly and implicitly, within various theoretical frameworks and perspectives. In addition to research, the understanding and application of theory to RME (and all family life) programming is critical to program design and implementation (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004; Higginbotham, Henderson, & Adler-Baeder, 2007). It is important for practitioners to recognize and frame their assumptions about

- 1) relationship development and maintenance (e.g., “Why do couples adopt and engage in practices that help versus hurt relationship quality and stability?”),
- 2) the effect of the content and skills taught in programs (e.g., influences on self; the effect on the partner; influences on parenting),
- 3) which strategies for teaching RME will stimulate positive impact (e.g., knowledge-based versus skills-practice approach),
- 4) who to engage (e.g., youth, single adults, engaged or married couples),
- 5) when to engage them (e.g., pre- and/or post-marital, transition to parenthood, post-divorce), and
- 6) how to engage the target audience (e.g., working with couples together, males and females separate, couples and children).



Cultural Considerations

Look for information shared by Dr. Linda Skogrand (Utah State University) in each chapter about things to consider when applying the NERMEM principles with socially, culturally and economically diverse audiences.



Working with Youth

Look for information shared by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman (Auburn University) in each chapter about how to apply the NERMEM principles when working with youth.

Although not intended to be a comprehensive and complete review of theory, below are a few examples of common theoretical perspectives that ground research on relationships and marriages (e.g., Fine & Fincham, 2013; Sassler, 2010; Olson, Fine, & Lloyd, 2005) and that informed the development of the model:

- *Ecological and systems theories.* Although distinct theories, both ecological (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and systems (e.g., Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993) theories focus on the interaction between multiple levels of influence. From an ecological systems approach, intimate partner relationship attitudes and behaviors are shaped by socio-cultural (e.g., expectations about relationships and marriage), community (e.g., resources to support healthy relationships and marriages), and familial norms and practices (e.g., models of healthy relationships and marriages). A systems approach to understanding couple relationships focuses more on the interaction between “sub-system” relationships embedded within the family (e.g., couple, parent-child, sibling, in-laws, etc.) and how those relationships influence the development and maintenance of healthy couple relationships. Through RME, couples can develop a better awareness of these influences, process how these influences have shaped their current relationship, and explore ways to negotiate and manage the impact of these influences on their relationship as well as the impact of their relationship on others.
- *Spillover theories.* More specifically, spillover theories (e.g., Saxbe, Rodriguez & Margolin, 2013), derived from a broader systems view, emphasize how experiences (both positive and negative) in one domain (e.g., work) or relationship (e.g., couple) affect experiences in another domain (e.g., home) or relationship (e.g., parent-child). RME can help couples understand these influences and develop skills to manage negative spillover from one domain to another. Conversely, when improvements are made in one area, it can be expected that other areas may benefit as well.
- *Life course theories.* A life course approach (e.g., Bengtson & Allen, 1993) to RME programming implies the value placed on linking past experiences (e.g., parental divorce, sexual onset, intimate partner violence) and relationships (e.g., prior marital and parenting experiences) to

understanding how and why individuals transition into new relationships and the continuity and change that occurs in these relationships. RME can offer individuals opportunities to identify and understand these influences and explore ways to make conscious and informed decisions as they develop new relationships and move forward in current relationships.

- *Social exchange theories.* To understand why individuals choose to remain in or exit relationships, social exchange theories (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suggest that individuals weigh the rewards (e.g., connectedness, quality time) and costs (e.g., re-occurring disagreements, unmet needs) experienced in a relationship and consider alternative possibilities (e.g., prospect of finding someone else; ability to have needs met by others). RME can support couples in developing skills that, when practiced, would lead to more satisfying exchanges within their relationship.
- *Social learning theories.* From a social learning perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1977), models of healthy versus unhealthy relationships serve as a source for learning what to expect and how to think, feel, and act in intimate partner relationships. Although



relationship attitudes and behaviors are learned during childhood from one's family of origin and experiences shared in intimate partner relationships, knowledge acquired through RME can reinforce healthy practices or facilitate change in practices that do not support healthy stable relationships by providing new models. This theory also assumes an intergenerational influence in that children of RME participants may benefit from observing healthier couple dynamics between parents.

- *Attribution theory.* Based on this socio-psychological perspective, attribution theory (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) contends that individuals make affective and cognitive assessments of their partner's behavior that influence how they react in future interactions with their partner. Attributions often reflect one's judgment of whether the behavior is stable versus unstable (e.g., "He forgot our anniversary because he doesn't care" versus "he has been under a lot of pressure at work lately."), an internal or external quality (e.g., "She yelled because she is an angry person" versus "there was a loud of noise in the room and she had to raise her voice."), and within their partner's control (e.g., "The car accident happened because you were texting" versus "the other driver ran a red light."). RME can help couples tune in to their attitudes and attributions and learn skills to reframe and process (individually and together) disagreements and challenges that arise within relationships in order to foster positivity.
- *Feminist theory.* A feminist perspective (e.g., Fox & Murry, 2000) encourages the understanding of how gender attitudes and practices are developed through socialization and interpersonal experiences and how these attitudes may influence couple dynamics in positive or negative ways. The perspective calls attention to the importance of valuing and supporting roles and experiences in couple relationships that make each individual feel valued and empowered. Thus, RME can facilitate feelings of safety and respect in intimate partner relationships and help couples develop skills to negotiate clear and equitable roles and expectations that support and fulfill each partner's needs in the relationship.



In summary, no one theory can adequately explain the complexity of couple relationships. Instead, these theories collectively offer insight into understanding the interaction between cognitive, affective, and behavioral influences on couple relationship experiences and outcomes. Elements of each of these are evident in the model presented here. We encourage practitioners to be aware of the applicability of various theoretical perspectives that can inform RME programming content and implementation design.



The authors who contributed to the development of the model featured in this publication are all members of the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network working group. This team of experts has experience in developing RME resources (e.g., curricula, newsletters, fact sheets), empirically documenting the impact of RME programs, publishing in peer reviewed journals on the research and practice associated with RME, and presenting on research and best practices for RME to state and national audiences. They are each experienced collaborators on RME projects in their states and have developed strong partnerships with local, state, and national organizations. To learn more, visit www.nermen.org/workgroup.php.

Cooperative Extension and RME

Stimulated by federal initiatives and earmarked funding focused on supporting “healthy marriages” since 2001, there has been an increased focus on providing relationship and marriage education on a larger scale through community-based efforts. The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a nationwide educational network that consists of experts that provide research-based information from land-grant universities to youth, adults, and professionals to promote individual, family, and community health. The CES offers various low- to no-cost educational resources and programs focused on supporting positive youth and family development and has historically addressed marital and relationship quality (Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

During the last decade, the efforts of CES to support healthy couple relationships have resulted in a plethora of curricula and educational resources and publications (e.g., fact sheets, newsletters, online videos) in this program area. Formalized in 2004, the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN), evolved from a working group organized in the CES in response to the emerging marriage movement (in 1997). Through continued dialogue with federal administration about the needs of the marriage initiative and ways that the CES could respond, NERMEN evolved and established a vision for a nation-wide outreach through Extension specialists and educators in partnership

with agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels. With a vision to support individuals and couples preparing for, developing and enriching healthy couple relationships, and a mission to provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice in RME, this collaborative of Extension faculty from across the country (researchers at the state level and program developers and educators at the state and local levels), have been involved in promoting these CES resources as well as creating new resources and guides to facilitate best practices in offering RME (see Futris, 2007). For more information about the various resources available from the CES, visit www.nermen.org.

The NERMEN

With both the demand and the need for broader offerings of relationship and marriage education, a large number of programs have been developed, presenting somewhat of a dilemma for practitioners who are interested in providing effective programming that is research-informed. In an effort to guide RME efforts to either select or develop RME programming, a working group from the NERMEN made up of Extension state-level faculty developed the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model* (NERMEM) that is featured in this publication.

Over the course of several years, members of the working group conducted extensive literature searches on predictors of marital and relationship quality and participated in several working conferences in which the information was reviewed and thematically organized. Efforts were made to conceptually distinguish key patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy, stable couple relationships that can be taught in an educational setting. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model consists of seven core principles or concepts. Working group members then developed papers on each of these seven core healthy relationship principles that summarize the research basis. Efforts have been made to present the information clearly and succinctly in order to appeal to a practitioner reading audience. A peer-review process was utilized and the final papers are presented here as individual NERMEN chapters for use as a resource and reference for research-based RME work.

The core components of the model are *strengths-based*, with the understanding that all individuals and couples exhibit unique strengths, capabilities, and potential to form and maintain healthy relationships. Consistent with sound family life education principles (Duncan & Goddard, 2011), this model reinforces the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and working with the

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model



strengths of individuals and couples as a starting point in program services. The principles and skills presented in this model are intended to build upon the individual learner's personal resources and motivation for change, and empower him/her to take responsibility in the care and quality of the couple relationship. The core components of the model are also *process-oriented*, meaning that the development and maintenance of healthy couple relationships is a life long journey. The practices that support healthy couple functioning are dynamic, not static, and evolve as the relationship adapts to the changing needs of the individual partners, couple, and growing family over time. As well, consistent with the guiding principles of the NERMEN working group, the model reinforces a "do no harm" approach and emphasizes that safety in relationships is a priority.

Implications for Programming

This research-based, theoretically grounded model was developed as a guide to help educators make informed decisions about content in RME. Here are a few applications of the model:

- *Selecting appropriate teaching curricula.* There are a wide range of curricula available that vary in content (and cost). And, while a growing number of these curricula have been evaluated and shown to have a positive impact on participants, few have been designated as "evidence-based." At a minimum, family life educators are encouraged to use resources that are research-based. This model can be used to assess the content covered in the curriculum to determine if the essential principles and skills needed to foster healthy relationships are addressed.
- *Developing educational resources.* In order to meet the specific relationship needs of diverse audiences, educators often find themselves creating new and/or supplemental resources that they can share with clients. This model can help inform the focus of those materials and offer direction in communicating developmentally and culturally appropriate messages.

Implications for Practice

Look for more information in each chapter about how the NERMEN principles can be applied in educational settings.



- *Designing and implementing programs.* In a comprehensive framework for RME developed by Alan Hawkins and his associates (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004), seven dimensions are described: content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, target, and delivery. Through this model we seek to address core content and provide recommendations for different target audiences (i.e., working with diverse audiences and youth). Suggestions are offered on the other elements in recent work (Futris, 2007); however, research to guide RME best practices for intensity, methods, timing, setting, and delivery is still on the horizon (Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

Conclusion

Addressing healthy relationships and marriages is consistent with any organizational mission that includes the promotion of child, youth, adult, and/or family well-being. There is strong evidence that points to the centrality of healthy relationships to adult health, family stability, parenting practices, and positive child outcomes. More so, research has demonstrated clear attributes and behaviors associated with healthy and stable couple relationships. In short, we have an empirical knowledge base for core elements of RME program content. The *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model* was developed to share this knowledge in a clear and practical way. While future empirical work will likely reveal additional information and RME content elements that may be critical for specific populations of RME participants, we encourage readers and practitioners to utilize the seven core concepts presented in this publication as a whole – and as the necessary foundation for research-based RME practice.



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Choose

Making Intentional Relationship Choices

Brian Higginbotham, Utah State University
Anthony Santiago, Iowa State University
Allen Barton, University of Georgia

What *Choose* Looks Like

- Being intentional: Deciding, not sliding
- Committing effort to the relationship
- Focusing on each other's strengths
- Avoiding hurtful thoughts and behaviors
- Finding ways to strengthen and grow the relationship
- Envisioning a healthy relationship and future together

Introduction

The central dimension of the NERMEM is *Choose*. *Choose* refers to deliberate and conscious decisions that help to create and strengthen healthy relationships. A strong, healthy, long-lasting relationship does not just happen by chance. Healthy relationships are determined by the initial choices a person makes when entering into a new relationship as well as the ongoing choices made to be committed, intentional, proactive, and strengths-focused in sustaining a relationship. *Choose* conveys the importance of intentionality in establishing and nourishing healthy relationships and is inherent, expected, and necessary in all of the other dimensions that will be discussed in this guide. According to Doherty (2001), an intentional relationship is “one where the partners are conscious, deliberate, and planful about maintaining and building their commitment and connection over the years” (p. 18). Intentionally choosing to think, feel, and behave in ways that strengthen relationships is essential to healthy and stable unions.

Choose applies to singles who make decisions regarding whether or not to create relationships, as well as couples who are trying to maintain and strengthen their relationships. For singles, *choose* applies not only to choosing who to be with, but also choosing to protect one's self and family. It involves choosing when to take the relationship to deeper levels or the next milestone, such as inviting new partners to meet children and relatives. For those in committed relationships, *choose* involves deciding to stay in the relationship. It involves choosing to take action and making decisions that allow for relationship enhancement.

In many ways, beginning a relationship is like launching a raft into a river. The river does not know, or care, whether the couple wants to go upstream, downstream, or stay close to the dock. Natural currents will flow downstream. It does not matter how much couples care about each other, no matter how full of hope, promise, and good intentions they may be; if they stay on the raft without a good deal of paddling – infrequent or sporadic paddling is not enough – they will end up somewhere down river (Doherty, 2001).

In human relations, “paddling” is analogous to the attention and energy



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that couples devote to their relationships. Research on successful relationships points to specific choices and actions that can help keep couples from unintentionally floating downstream (Oswald, 2002; Vangelisti, 2000). These choices are the foundation of safe, stable, and satisfying unions and each requires conscientious and intentional effort. They include: (1) making a sustained commitment to put effort into a relationship, (2) deciding to make the relationship a priority, and (3) envisioning a healthy relationship.

Make a Sustained Commitment to Effort in a Relationship

Increased satisfaction with a relationship often comes with increased personal commitment to that relationship (Givertz & Segrin, 2005; Goddard, 2007). There is research that suggests that the more committed couples are to their relationships, the more satisfied they are (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2011; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). There is also research that suggests that, the more satisfied couples are with their relationships, the more committed they are to the relationship (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Regardless of which comes first, satisfaction or commitment, it is safe to say that commitment appears to be a key characteristic of healthy relationships (Drigotas, Rusbolt & Verette, 1999).

Entering a Relationship

Before a commitment can be made, the individual must first decide if he or she wants to enter the relationship at all. Carefully thinking about the relationship's potential and making a decision of whether or not to start it is important. The decision should be based upon what creates a strong foundation for healthy relationships: shared values and interests, effective conflict management, and commitment. If each partner feels that they share the same morals and values, are interested in similar things, have similar or compatible goals for the future, and can work to manage conflict appropriately, they may decide that they are able to make a commitment to each other.

Decide, Don't Slide

Having a vision for a healthy relationship includes actively deciding where the relationship is going, what steps are next in the relationship, and setting goals for the future together (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Think back to the illustration of the raft going down the river with no direction or goals. Planning a course and actively pursuing that course can help avoid catastrophe. Simply putting the raft in the river with no direction or decision of where to go is similar to "sliding" through the relationship. For example, a young mother may allow someone she met to stay over one night, then ask him to watch her child for an afternoon. Then it progresses into him coming over more often and eventually moving in without a discussion or an active decision by either person to be in a committed relationship. Not only is the relationship at risk with a scenario like this, but the child

Why Choose Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- Promoting child safety and health is often facilitated by empowering parents to assume responsibility and control over their actions. As they *choose* to avoid actions that put their child at harm and *choose* to engage in behaviors that positively promote their child's well-being, it is important that they also consider how their relationship choices may also impact their own and their children's lives.
- Parents serve as role models for children's interpersonal relationships. Children whose parents engage in frequent conflict and have poor coping techniques may never have the chance to see what healthy relationships look like. If children are unable to envision a healthy relationship, they may have greater difficulty navigating relationships in the future.
- When parents are in unhealthy relationships, they can make a conscious choice to end the relationship or make change within it. When violence is present, the choice may require seeking help and counsel from a trusted person or professional. It is vital for children to understand that they have the power to be intentional with their actions so they can proactively pave the way for happiness and health. When parents are intentional in their actions, they can make decisions that ultimately benefit their children and teach children how to make good choices themselves.





is at a higher risk (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007; Christensen, Antle, & Johnson, 2008). Especially when there are children involved, it is important for single parents to make smart and explicit choices about the relationships that they begin and how the relationship develops over time. Deciding to be in a healthy relationship rather than sliding into a bad one haphazardly can make a huge difference in the life of a child.

Commitment to the Relationship

Commitment can manifest itself in various ways. For example, one indicator of commitment is *dedication*, which is seen within statements like: "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life" and "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter" (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Overall, dedication infers loyalty to one's partner; dedicated couples exhibit perseverance to ensure that they are doing what it takes to remain faithful toward one another. Individuals who show dedication within their relationships are also more likely to experience greater relationship satisfaction and less intense problems (Goddard, 2007; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Wilcox & Nock, 2006).

When couples decide to marry, commitment to a lifelong marriage is important for a number of reasons. Research indicates that commitment is related to high marital quality, fewer relationship problems, and positive adjustment and expression. Individual commitment and shared commitment both contribute to marital quality (Drigotas, Rusbolt & Verette, 1999). Couples who share a strong sense of commitment are more likely to report

happiness in their marriages. For example, women who believe marriage is a lifelong commitment are happier with the affection and understanding they receive from their husbands than women who do not (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Shared commitment appears to foster mutual trust and higher levels of emotional investment on the part of husbands, which, in turn, promotes marital happiness among wives (Wilcox & Nock, 2006).

Commitment to the relationship can also be demonstrated through the act of forgiveness, a choice that partners can make in reaction to repair attempts (see *Manage*). Research shows that forgiveness contributes to successful relationships (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009). For example, forgiveness can make reconciliations more possible (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Forgiving another person is not something a person earns, but is something freely granted by the individual who has been offended. Forgiveness can be a particularly powerful dynamic as it presents a transformation of motivation which minimizes the negative cycles of interaction (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011). For instance, when one partner says a demeaning comment to the other person, the offended person can either respond in a similar fashion with a demeaning comment of their own or, through forgiveness, acknowledge the wrongfulness of the comment by *choosing* to respond in a positive way toward their partner that is not retaliatory, withdrawing, or condemning.

Intentionally Grow the Relationship

Putting energy into the relationship can create a healthier relationship and create higher levels of satisfaction between partners (Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2011). A few examples of intentionality include planning dates, giving gifts, making plans for the future together, showing love and affection without being asked, dividing household tasks and chores, and meeting each other's needs (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Committing time and energy to working on a relationship does not always come naturally. Therefore, it is important for both partners to make a conscious effort to take time each day to demonstrate commitment toward the relationship and each other (Goddard, 2007).

Intentionality also includes seeking out resources to improve the relationship. For example, attending a marriage retreat or a relationship seminar, participating in marriage and relationship education, reading books about relationships, reading informational pamphlets, or seeking out counseling if needed, are resources that help to improve and strengthen relationships (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009). Many of these resources can provide ideas for how partners can incorporate strategies into their daily lives that allow each other to demonstrate commitment. Furthermore, suggesting the use of one of these resources, in and of itself, also shows commitment to the relationship.

Cultural Considerations

- Individuals have varying degrees of choice in choosing a partner or spouse, depending upon their culture. Although many individuals have a choice in choosing a partner or spouse, some couple relationships are arranged or highly influenced by extended family members (Ingoldsby, 1995; Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012). For example, Asian and Indian parents are often involved in choosing a spouse for their adult children.
- Low-resource couples often have barriers to accessing relationship and marriage education. Low-resource couples often struggle with issues of survival and are preoccupied with making sure they have food, shelter, and clothing (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). As a result, they may not feel they have time in their lives for relationship and marriage education. In addition, accessing some relationship and marriage education may require financial resources such as fees for classes, gas, child care, and time to participate. Many low-resource couples do not have access to the Internet to learn about relationship and marriage education. These barriers need to be addressed in providing education to low-resource audiences.
- In some cultures the family is the priority rather than the couple relationship. Not all cultures view the couple relationship as the priority and the base for subsequent family relationships. For example, Latino couples view the family as more important than the marriage relationship (Faliiov, 1998; Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). Latino couples typically do not leave their children so they can spend time as a couple, but rather do most things as a family.

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

Decide to Make the Relationship a Priority

Make Time for the Relationship

Couples who prioritize their relationships spend quality time together and make a point to do so on a regular basis. Simply spending time together is a key predictor of marital satisfaction. When individuals in a relationship believe that enough time is being spent together and that they are valued and appreciated, they report higher marital satisfaction, particularly after becoming parents for the first time (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Russell-Chapin, Chapin & Sattler, 2001). This might mean that each individual must choose to spend time with their partner over other activities or events outside of the relationship. Spending time together on a daily basis is ideal. (see *Share*). Researchers have observed that wives rate marriages more positively if the couple spends time together on a daily basis; for husbands, the total amount of time spent together appears to more strongly influence their perceptions of marital quality (Szinovacz, 1996; Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002). Time spent together can be as simple as having coffee together every morning or spending 10 minutes talking about each other's day before going to bed. Establishing consistent 'date nights' can also be very beneficial by ensuring spouses spend regular time alone with each other. Spouses with greater amounts of such "couple time" report higher marital happiness, lower divorce proneness, and satisfaction with couple communication (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). For both husbands and wives, there is a clear relationship between time spent engaging with one another and marital happiness – the more time partners spend together, the more they enjoy that time and value the relationship (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Zuo, 1992).

Find a Balance Between Individual Interests and the Relationship

In every relationship, it is sometimes necessary for each individual to make sacrifices in order to make the relationship a priority. Sacrifice has been defined as "foregoing one's own immediate self-interest to promote the well-being of the partner or relationship" (Etchevery & Le, 2005, p. 104). A willingness to sacrifice demonstrates commitment and appreciation. Relationships can be strengthened when partners choose to defer their own preferences for the good of the relationship. This can be as simple as staying home on a Saturday morning to work around the house instead of going out with friends. It may be as difficult as turning down a promotion that would require extended trips away from home. People come to trust their partners when they see them making pro-relationship choices and not worrying as much about their own self-interests (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). When an individual makes a choice not to sacrifice for the good of the relationship, his/her partner may be left feeling unappreciated, which can lead to conflict. Not surprisingly, research has indicated that a willingness to sacrifice and the perception of sacrifice are associated with strong

commitment and high relationship satisfaction (Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007) because it promotes a sense of closeness and relational interdependence (Etcheverry & Le, 2005). Separate activities and interests are healthy, too, but only if they are balanced with couple time.

Partners should understand that sacrifice is good for the relationship when it is voluntary and when it is viewed positively by both partners (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). Sacrifice does NOT imply that individuals should accept domestic violence or allow themselves to be controlled emotionally, psychologically, socially, financially, or physically by their partners. A relationship is unhealthy when the sacrifice is unbalanced, sacrifice is demanded, or where guilt-inducing statements like "If you really loved me you would..." are used in order to get one's way.

Avoid Harmful Thoughts and Behaviors

Deciding to make one's relationship a priority also involves making the decision not to partake in harmful thoughts or behaviors. Harmful behavior can put an individual at risk and can also harm that person's partner and family (Leonard, 2002). Harmful behaviors include, but are not limited to, doing drugs, alcohol abuse, gambling, and other activities that could cause emotional, physical, or financial harm. As is described further in *Care for Self*, making sure that individuals are healthy and happy first enables them to be well enough to turn their attention to others. Making a relationship a priority starts with making individual health and well-being a priority.

Similar to the way drug and alcohol abuse can cause problems for individuals and their relationships, harmful thoughts and communication patterns can also wreak havoc in relationships. Research shows that healthy communication patterns, like sharing positive affect and showing physical affection, can strengthen a relationship (Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005); see *Care* for more information. Unhealthy communication patterns, such as being overly critical, defensive, or withdrawing from one's partner altogether can be extremely harmful to a relationship (Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Hanzal & Segrin, 2009). Couples should consider how they want to interact with one another and make the choice to establish positive interaction patterns right from the start. Having a concrete idea in mind for the



"right" way to interact can help couples follow through and engage in interaction patterns that promote well-being in the relationship (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). Decades of research focused on how couples interact with one another has shown that couples who use more negative interaction patterns (e.g., anger, dominance, contempt, stonewalling) are more prone to unhappiness and divorce (Gottman, 1994; Graber, Laurenceau, Miga, Chango, & Coan, 2011). Creating healthy guidelines for communication and interactions can be beneficial for both partners and may prevent problems and harm (Vangelisti, 2000).

Setting limits on other harmful behavior is equally important. In light of the prevalence and painful ramifications of infidelity (Green & Sabini, 2006; Miller & Maner, 2008), individuals should be careful about how close, physically and emotionally, they allow themselves to become with friends and co-workers, as well as online contacts (Cravens, Leckie & Whiting, 2013; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Choosing one's partner over others, even other family members, and taking a partner's side when conflict outside of the relationship occurs can also strengthen the marital relationship (Chaney, 2010; Christensen & Miller, 2006). This demonstrates their level of commitment to the relationship. Romantic partners demonstrate commitment by choosing to be content with the relationship rather than looking for "greener pastures." When individuals commit themselves to and feel invested in their relationships, they become less attentive to potential alternatives. On the other hand, people who report going out with friends without telling their partners, those who are willing to have an affair, and those who flirt with people without mentioning their partners do, in fact, spend more

time considering alternatives (Hackathorn, Mattingly, Clark, & Mattingly, 2011). Consideration of alternatives makes it difficult to truly commit to a relationship. Consequently, attention to alternatives decreases current relationship satisfaction and adjustment (Miller, 1997). Individuals have the ability to choose to ignore relationship alternatives, although this may happen naturally as a byproduct when people simply choose to focus on strengthening their current relationship. In other words, “even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, happy gardeners will be less likely to notice” (Miller, 1997, p. 758).

Internet Disconnection

With an increase of technology in the home, boundaries between work and family are easily blurred. The amount of technology and other media use, especially when one’s partner is present, plays a role in marital satisfaction (Chesley, 2005). Therefore, media usage at home should be limited, especially during quality time with one’s partner. One example is limiting Internet usage. This is important for several reasons. It can interfere with quality couple and family interactions, and it can introduce a possible threat to relationship quality and fidelity. It has been estimated that up to one-third of Internet users utilize the web for sexual purposes (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). Relationship problems, ranging from mild to severe, are often the result of such use (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O’Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). For example, in one study of individuals who had attended therapy as a result of a spouse’s cybersex behavior, half of cybersex users and one-third of partners had lost interest in sex with each other (Schneider, 2000). In another study, compulsive Internet users experienced lower commitment and higher conflict in their marital relationships (Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Muusses, 2011). Another example is the use of cell phones when spending time with each other. In today’s technology-dependent society, it can be extremely easy to keep phones within reach, spend time online, text, or even take calls when trying to spend time with a partner. Making the decision to be present during couple time and taking that time to focus only on the relationship demonstrates a commitment to spending quality time together.



Envision a Healthy Relationship

Focus on Strengths

Everybody has both strengths and weaknesses. Even the most perfect of partners will have unique ways of doing things and quirks in their personalities. When the honeymoon is over and challenges and differences become more apparent, couples have a choice to make – partners can either begin to criticize one another for their weaknesses and differences, or they can focus on each other’s strengths. The research on happy marriages strongly supports the latter choice when trying to strengthen relationships. For example, in a study of new parents, the husband’s expression of fondness toward his wife predicted marital satisfaction (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). In contrast, as noted earlier, partners who criticize one another are more likely to be unhappy in their relationships and may end up divorced (Gottman, 1994; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; Smith & Peterson, 2008). Individuals in committed relationships who choose to express positive sentiments, like acceptance or validation, toward their partners end up forming more positive images of their partners because they bring out the best in each other (Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003).

Thinking about a partner’s strengths is believed to foster positive relationship development because of the emphasis and attention given to virtues and the minimization and inattention given to faults (see *Care*). Satisfied individuals choose to find redeeming features in their partners’ faults and construct “yes, but” interpretations that diminish specific weaknesses (e.g., “Yes, he may have been short with me, but I know that he’s in a hurry to get

to work for a big meeting today”) (Murray & Holmes, 1999). Happily married couples choose to engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive perceptions that encourage positive interactions, which, in turn, foster more positive perceptions (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Couples in more satisfying marriages also tend to describe their partners’ positive traits in more global terms, with negative traits being described in more specific, narrow terms (Neff & Karney, 2002). Not surprisingly, and regardless of self-esteem and depression levels, individuals are more satisfied when their partners view them positively and are less satisfied when their partners view them negatively (Sacco & Phares, 2001).

Assure a Healthy Future Together

Part of being committed is making one another feel safe in the relationship. This includes having a shared vision for a healthy relationship and reassuring each other of a future together. Husbands and wives who use assurances report positive relationship outcomes (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Assurances are statements or behaviors that imply that the relationship has a future. Purchasing a washer and dryer together, or signing both names to a lease agreement are assurances, as is saying, “Next summer, I want to take you on a vacation to the beach.” In one study of over two thousand individuals in romantic relationships, one of the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction was the extent to which a partner’s usage of assurances exceeded one’s expectations (Dainton, 2000). Consistently making statements and doing things to assure that the relationship has a future helps both people to envision what that future might look like.

Working with Youth

- For adolescents it is important to stress that they need time to learn about who they are *before* they make a serious commitment to another person. A committed relationship or marriage is a serious decision. Such a decision should not be made without first considering who you are, your life goals, and the type of partner you need to maximize your quality of life. Adolescents can benefit from learning about what a healthy, committed mature relationship looks like through role models and instructional lessons (Gardner & Boellaard, 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, Adler-Baeder, Eryigit, & Paulk, 2009).
- During the teen years, adolescents should be encouraged to explore the kinds of choices that might fit best for them. This means dating a range of different people, developing their own interests, and spending time with a broad group of friends.
- Activities employed with youth should help them to focus on self-knowledge and the development of their personal strengths. Through self-knowledge youth become prepared to find others with whom they fit and can develop lasting, satisfying relationships.
- Developing a future vision during adolescence also is important for the later choices that will be made. Part of this vision is the development of “possible selves.” Possible selves are who one hopes or expects to be in the future, as well as who one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As adolescents consider the possible selves they do and do not desire, they also consider their strategies for attaining desired possible selves and avoiding undesired possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Such strategies include the kinds of people they need to have in their lives to facilitate optimal outcomes.
- Emphasize with adolescents the idea of “deciding” rather than “sliding.” Developmentally, adolescents are more impulsive than adults and sometimes need assistance through education and mentoring to consider the consequences of their actions (Kerpelman, 2007). This guidance particularly is important when it comes to decisions within romantic relationships, where impulsive choices can lead to undesired and sometimes traumatic emotional and physical costs.
- Often youth think they are in love when they feel the excitement of attraction and infatuation. It is important to help them understand the difference between these initial strong feelings and the slower development of love and commitment in a relationship. Addressing the nature of commitment also is key when working with adolescents.
- Helping youth detect the warning signs of unhealthy or potentially abusive relationships also is a key part of *choose*. Often adolescents may disregard these signs since they may be more focused on acceptance, popularity, or fitting in rather than making good choices for themselves. Also, they may have witnessed unhealthy models in their homes and may not have a knowledge of what healthy, committed relationships look like.

Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University



Implications for Practice



- Consider asking individuals to identify barriers or obstacles that prevent them from establishing or maintaining healthy relationships. How can they make a conscious effort to overcome those obstacles?
- With couples in committed relationships, ask them to generate ideas for how to make the relationship a priority. Have them identify actions that can be done individually or together as a couple to prioritize the relationship.
- Ask how people show dedication and commitment to their partners. If they can't think of any specific examples, have them think about a couple they admire and describe how they show commitment to one another.
- Ask individuals to share their dreams and goals for themselves and their relationships. Have them identify concrete steps they can take to reach those goals and make plans to start taking those steps.

Conclusion

The concept of *choosing* to think, feel, and act in an intentional way has profound implications for the quality and well-being of couple relationships. Couples can choose to deliberately think, feel, and act in ways that encourage long-lasting, healthy relationships, such as giving attention to the direction of the relationship, intentionally planning activities and taking time for each other, showing love and respect, and being conscientious of the other's strengths and positive aspects of relationships. Couples who engage in a variety of intentional ways to strengthen their relationships often have happier, more satisfying relationships (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). It has been said that "in marriage, the grass grows greener on the side of the fence *you water most*" (Marshal & Goddard, 2007). Like a nice lawn, marriages

need to be consistently and conscientiously nourished. That is not to say there will never be weeds or problems – all couples experience challenges; what makes the difference are the choices each partner in the relationship makes when faced with challenges. Consistent and conscientious choices to strengthen, prioritize, and protect a relationship will help couples weather the inevitable storms and droughts while promoting healthy, stable, and satisfying unions.



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Care for Self

Maintaining Physical, Sexual, Emotional, and Spiritual Wellness

Angela Wiley, University of Illinois
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University
Kelly Warzinik, University of Missouri

What *Care for Self* Looks Like

- Eating healthy and exercising regularly
- Setting regular sleep and wake times
- Noticing and appreciating the good things in your life
- Finding ways to serve and use your strengths
- Looking for the positive meaning in your life
- Managing stress in healthy ways

Introduction

Recent reviews of the research linking marital status and health conclude that a good marriage can have significant positive effects on health behaviors, health care access and use, and physical health and longevity (Carr & Springer, 2010; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). For example, compared to singles, married young men and women have lower rates of heavy drinking and overall alcohol consumption (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2007). Married individuals are more likely to have health insurance (Jovanovic, Lin, & Chang, 2003), use preventive health services (Lee et al., 2005), and experience shorter hospital stays (Iwashyna & Christakis, 2003). Marriage, however, is linked to decreased physical activity in some studies (Eng et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2003) and weight gain in others (e.g., Sobal, 2003). Notably, it is not just relationship status, but the quality of relationships that best predicts health outcomes. Happily married adults have lower rates of heart failure, cancer and other diseases, and are embedded in tighter networks of emotional support (Carr & Springer, 2010; Wood et al., 2007). Further, those in healthy marriages, as compared to unhealthy marriages, have better physical wellness, in general, and live longer (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

While better health may be a consequence of healthy marriages, better mental and physical health also have emerged as a significant *predictor* of higher marital quality (e.g., Booth & Johnson, 1994; Coyne, Thompson, & Palmer, 2002; Dehle & Weiss, 1998; Faulkner, Davey, & Davey, 2005; Skerrett, 1998). Research on couples and marriage tends to focus more attention on the interactional processes of the dyad and less on the role of individual partner characteristics (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). Yet, these individual attributes and well-being indicators are potent predictors of marital quality (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). While interactions between partners are undoubtedly important to relationship quality, each partner has individual traits and characteristics that impact these interactions (Amato & Booth, 1997; Blum & Mehrabian, 1999). While continuing attention to the couple as a unit is important, bolstering individual strengths is foundational for supporting couple relationships. Thus, a core component for relationship and marriage education is the inclusion of





Put on Your Own Mask First

Many are familiar with the instructions passengers receive on an airplane: in case of emergency, put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting others. If an individual is not taking care of him or herself, it is impossible to take care of another person as well. When individuals attend to their own health first, they are better people to be around and are more equipped to take care of others. When a person doesn't get enough sleep, is hungry, or stressed, he or she may be more likely to not respond in a healthy way to his or her partner or children. It is important for individuals to make their health a priority in order to maintain a healthy relationship.

information that promotes the well-being of individuals. This chapter summarizes the literature from various disciplines on methods for enhancing the well-being and health of individual partners and the link to enhancing the couple relationship.

Care for Self utilizes the World Health Organization's definition of wellness: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 1946). Expanding this idea, being "well" depends on regular practice of positive lifestyle behaviors and development of healthy habits. Importantly, mental/emotional wellness and physical wellness are intertwined such that the lack of wellness in one often predicts decline in the other. For example, depression and anxiety have been associated with immune system suppression (Frasure-Smith, Lesperance, & Talajic, 1995; Herbert & Cohen, 1993; Ormel et al., 1997) and coronary dysfunction (Biing-Jiun et al., 2011). This chapter addresses the need for the individual to maintain psychological/emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual wellness in the creation and maintenance of stable, healthy marriage and couple relationships.

Physical Wellness

Physical wellness is critical to individual well-being. Those who suffer from illness and pain report a notably lower quality of life than those who are not ill (Skevington, 1998; Rubin & Peyrot, 1999). In addition, conditions such as obesity and eating disorders are associated with lower individual quality of life (Fontaine & Barofsky, 2001; Hay, 2003). Poor physical health does not only influence the individual, but influences the couple relationship as well. Recent studies document the negative impact of poor health on relationships (Oberto, Gold, & Yorgason, 2004; Wilson & Waddoups, 2002). For example, marital communication and satisfaction decline after heart surgery (Van Der Poel & Greeff, 2003). Also, risky health behaviors such as smoking and substance abuse are associated with relationship problems (Fu & Goldman, 2000). Poor health can impact the physical abilities of the individual and can also cause stress for the partner and impact marital satisfaction in the couple relationship. In many cases, it may be the psychological stress associated with a partner's illness that impacts the perception of marital quality (Hagedoorn et al., 2000; Rohrbaugh et al., 2002).

Other factors associated with poor physical health may indirectly impact relationships. For example, women tend to think that their weight and appearance is central to their husbands' relationship satisfaction. While research shows that this is not the case, these factors do tend to impact women's relationship satisfaction and self-esteem (Ball, Crawford, & Kenardy, 2004; Markey, Markey, & Birch, 2004). These negative self-assessments may contribute to negative couple interactions and poorer relationship quality. Overall, evidence indicates that investments in physical wellness benefit the individual and the couple (directly and

Why Care for Self Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- When parents are able to care for themselves, they are more likely to properly care for their children. Stressed out and unhealthy parents are less likely to focus attention on children and may turn to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance use, to feel better.
- Children pick up eating, exercise, and sleep habits from their parents and family environments. If parents do not maintain proper nutrition and get enough sleep and exercise, children are unlikely to do so as well, causing emotional, physical, and academic problems. These habits could last long into adulthood and cause problems throughout a child's life.
- Clients that family life educators deal with on a daily basis may have high levels of stress. Teaching them how to take care of themselves has implications for the client as an individual, their couple and other relationships, and their parent-child relationship.



indirectly). Research shows that three main areas contribute to general physical well-being: healthy eating, physical activity, and sleep.

Healthy Eating

Medical researchers state that poor eating habits and being overweight are directly related to several of the leading causes of death in the U.S. such as heart disease, some cancers, strokes, and diabetes (Danaei et al., 2009). It is also important to recognize the serious individual health and relationship risks that disordered eating can present, including extreme restrictiveness, bulimia, and anorexia (Berg, 1996). The aim is to promote healthy eating as an investment in individual and couple well-being, not necessarily “thinness.” It is important that individuals make the effort to not only have healthy eating habits themselves, but to encourage their partner and other family members to eat healthy as well, thus creating a culture of wellness within the home.

Included with healthy eating is sharing meal time as a couple or a family. Individuals can improve their eating practices by sitting together for family meals. Meals that are consumed in a positive, supportive family context (as opposed to alone) tend to be more nutritious, less fatty, and higher in many nutrients (Boutelle, Birnbaum, Lytle, Murray, & Story, 2003). Eating should not be only about consuming the proper amount and combination of nutrient, but should be a pleasure that sustains and enriches us (Wrzesniewski, Rozin, & Bennett, 2003). Shared meals can be rituals that are psychologically supportive and enjoyable (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). By making a habit to share mealtimes, individuals cannot only improve their eating habits, but also improve their relationships.

Physical Activity

There are many reasons to engage in physical activity on a regular basis. For example, physical activity promotes coronary heart health (Havranek & Ware 1999), lowers Type 2 diabetes incidence (Knowler, 2002), and lowers blood pressure (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009). Physical activity also has proven benefits for mental health (Lawlor & Hopker, 2001; TFCPS, 2002; Van Gool et al., 2003). In spite of these pluses, the overwhelming majority of Americans do not get the regular recommended amount of physical activity (USDHHS, 2010). A number of studies have shown that people tend to gain weight and get less physical activity after they marry (i.e., Craig & Truswell, 1988; Jeffery & Rick, 2002; Kahn, Williamson, & Stevens, 1991). Further, lack of spousal and family support is often listed as a barrier to becoming more physically active (Sallis, Hovell, & Hofstetter, 1992). At the same time, partners can influence each other's physical activity positively because when one is active, the other is more likely to be (Homish & Leonard, 2008; Falba & Sindelar, 2008). There is evidence that social support for partner physical activity is important (Troost, Owen, Bauman, Sallis, & Brown, 2002), and married people who exercise together rather than separately are more likely to continue with it (Raglin, 2001). Additionally, the companionship of joint activities is linked to relationship satisfaction and commitment (Sprecher et al., 1995). While independent physical activity is better than none at all, there are a number of benefits for couples associated with exercising together. The *Share* chapter expands on the importance of joint activities for couples.

Sleep Habits

It is well known that sleep is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (2007) suggests that sleep problems are an epidemic in the U.S. Research shows that we need the right amount of sleep to be healthy (Majde & Krueger, 2005; Youngstedt & Kripke, 2004). New parents, who commonly experience increased conflict and stress in their couple relationship (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003), are also prone to sleep deprivation (Gjerdingen & Center, 2003). Sleep deprivation is associated with lowered immune system functioning (Irwin, McClintick, Costlow, Fortner, White, & Gillin, 1996). Either too little or too much sleep is associated with health and emotional problems (Benca, 2001). There is increasing evidence that patterns of sleep are as important as the amount of sleep. Disordered sleep patterns (e.g., frequent awakenings and inconsistent daily sleep amount) are not conducive to optimal couple relationship functioning (Al-Barrak, Shepertycky, & Kryger, 2003; Armstrong, Wallace, & Marais, 1999). Reinforcing the knowledge that getting enough sleep and getting consistent sleep is important can help couples and families understand that they should put effort into creating healthy sleep patterns.

Cultural Considerations

- It is likely that people living with limited financial resources find eating healthy to be a challenge. Strained financial resources often means having to do without balanced meals (Rank, 2000). Foods that are high in calories are more likely to fit into a low-income budget than fresh fruits and vegetables. Some communities may not have easy access to grocery stores that carry healthy foods.
- Good health is often compromised in low-income families because of the lack of access to health and dental care, the effect of increased stress on one's physical and mental health, and living conditions that result in health issues such as asthma and lead poisoning (Rank, 2000; Unger, Cuevas, & Woolfolk, 2007).
- The source of social support or where one seeks help with physical or mental problems varies among cultural groups. Some cultural groups seek help from leaders or family members within their culture. For example, American Indians might seek counsel from a spiritual leader such as a medicine man. People who are African American often view their church as a source of support (Taylor, Lincoln, & Chatters, 2005).

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University



Sexual Activity and Sexual Health

Sexuality is an important part of couple relationships (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Research indicates diverse reports of frequency of sex for average American couples (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995, 1996). For most people, satisfaction with their couple sexual relationship is intimately connected to their overall relationship satisfaction (Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002; Sprecher & Cate, 2004). Most married Americans report being extremely or very pleased with the quality of their sexual relationship (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Waite & Joyner, 2001; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). On the other hand, some marriages have a low frequency of sexual intimacy or are “sexless,” which can be harmful to the stability of the relationship (Yabiku & Gager, 2009). Some data suggest that sexual satisfaction does decline somewhat with age, especially if the frequency drops (Edwards & Booth, 1994) but this is by no means a given (Thompson et al., 2011). Hormonal changes, as well as the side effects of many medications can impact sexual relationships and should be mentioned to medical professionals as needed (Sperry & Carlson, 1992).

Sexual performance and satisfaction are clearly linked to physical and emotional wellness of each partner (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Satisfaction with sex is also related to other important aspects of couple functioning such as how open partners are about their sexual desires and feelings (Byers & Demmons, 1999), how couples communicate about sex (Cupach & Comstock, 1990), and how power sharing plays out in the relationship (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994). Safety, avoiding risks, and not being pressured are essential to sexual health. Professionals should also educate clients about other types of sexual health, such as preventing STIs/HIV, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and intimate partner violence.

Emotional Wellness

The psychological well-being of individuals is multidimensional and research on individuals is multidisciplinary. Some domains relevant to couple relationships include autonomy, self-acceptance, positive social relationships, sense of mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). There are many characteristics of psychological well-being or successful “personal adjustment” and several have been linked to couple relationship quality.

Positivity

Well-adjusted people are generally positive and optimistic and tend to have better emotional and physical health outcomes (see Carver & Scheier, 1999; Rääkkönen, Matthews, Flory, Owens, & Gump, 1999). Those who are positive and optimistic also tend to fare better in their couple relationships (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman, 1993; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). There is some evidence that characteristically happier people are more likely to find and remain in couple relationships than individuals who are characteristically unhappy (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Deiner, 2003). Pleasant temperaments are correlated with marital satisfaction (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999). The importance of positivity is also addressed in *Choose, Care, Share, and Manage*.

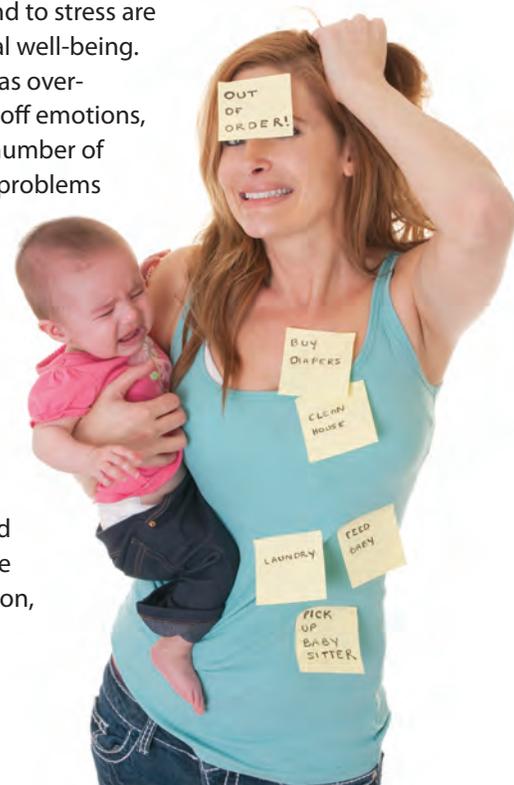
One way to remain positive is by noticing and appreciating all of the good in life. Encourage individuals to think about happy moments in the past and present as an individual and talk about these with their partner to help them focus on the good in their life. Also encouraging them to think about a positive future and set goals to achieve the future they want can also promote positive feelings. As individuals notice and appreciate the good in life, they will find greater happiness and satisfaction as couples, too.

Maintaining Mindfulness

Attitudinally, well-adjusted people are usually “mindful” (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindful people are “mentally engaged, open to new experiences, and aware of new contexts” (Burpee & Langer, 2005). They are flexible and willing to consider alternative perspectives. Systematic increases in mindfulness have been shown to improve physical and psychological wellness of individuals (for review, see Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004) as well as marital satisfaction (Burpee & Langer, 2005). Mindful people are also able to focus on strengths and use those strengths in their day-to-day lives and in relationships (see *Choose and Care*). Although we often see strengths as talents, they also include personality traits, such as kindness or leadership ability. Helping individuals identify and use their strengths encourages a better self-image leading to better social and emotional health. Trainings designed to facilitate mindfulness have been found to improve self-esteem, reduce stress, and promote positive interactions (e.g., Dtijnen, Visser, Garseen, & Hudig, 2008; Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn, & Bratt, 2007; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, & Flinders, 2008).

Emotion Regulation

Well-adjusted people are aware of and can regulate their emotions. “Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998). Individuals’ ability to regulate emotions (Gross & Levenson, 1997; Gross & Munoz, 1995) and effectively respond to stress are critical for their mental well-being. Dysregulation, either as over-reacting or as cutting off emotions, has been linked to a number of emotional and social problems (Wei, Vogel, Ku, & Zakalik, 2005). Physical health is also sensitive to emotional regulation. The suppression of negative emotion, such as anger, has been associated with hypertension and coronary heart disease (i.e., Jorgensen, Johnson, Kolodziej, & Schreer, 1996), particularly for



Promoting Emotional Wellness

- *Raise awareness of the value of individual emotional/psychological health for relationship quality.* Individuals benefit from understanding that efforts to promote their own and their partner's emotional health is essential to working on the couple relationship.
- *Promote positivity and "mindfulness."* Optimism and positivity are not merely a matter of temperament but can be acquired and enhanced through individuals' efforts (Buchanan, Gardenswartz, & Seligman, 1999). Reframing a situation more positively can enhance a person's skills in this area. Programs exist that teach mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn & Bratt, 2007).
- *Encourage goal-setting.* When people identify and make progress toward short- and long-term "big picture" goals, their stress levels generally diminish (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003). Intrinsic goals such as those related to personal growth and community contribution have been linked to a higher subjective sense of well-being (Emmons, 2003). The negative effects of stress on physical and emotional health are eased when individuals bolster their sense of control over and mastery of their circumstances (see Turner & Roszell, 1994, for a review) and have back-up plans to compensate when necessary (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003).
- *Address emotion regulation skills.* Understanding one's stress response aids in identifying strategies to help manage physiological and emotional reactions to stressors. Although research shows that emotion regulation skills are mostly stable and vary widely, individuals can adopt techniques to be more self-aware of the stress response onset and for controlling negative emotion arousal and expression (Gross, 1998).
- *Address the value of self-awareness and the use of positive stress management strategies.* Positive forms of stress management include exercising, painting, and writing. Support from friends, co-workers, extended kin, and neighbors are all linked to positive coping. Social support is also related to lower levels of distress and higher functioning (Barlow, 2001). Social support networks are discussed further in the *Connect* chapter.

women (Nabi, Hall, Koskenvuo, Singh-Manoux, Oksanen, Suominen, & Vahtera, 2010). Clearly, emotion regulation affects couple interactions. The ability to regulate one's negative emotions during conflict, or utilize self-soothing strategies such as humor and de-escalation, are critical for long-term relationship success (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). For example, taking a few minutes to be alone, taking a few deep breaths, and attempting to see humor in a bad situation are ways to regulate negative emotions (See *Manage* for more information).

Well-adjusted people are knowledgeable about signs and symptoms of mental distress and illness. The presence of intense or recurrent anxiety or depression symptoms (NIMH, 2007), especially involving thought of harm to self or others, should be met with professional intervention. Well-adjusted individuals take action when signs and symptoms of more severe distress are evident. In addition, well-adjusted people use positive, rather than destructive forms of stress management.



Working with Youth

- Much of the emphasis with adolescents in relationship education and intervention programs involves helping them appreciate and care for themselves and manage negative emotions (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higgenbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Gardner, Giese, & Parrot, 2004; Kerpelman, 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, Adler-Baeder, Eryigit, & Paulk, 2009). Since adolescence is a period of intense identity work (i.e., engaging in the identity formation process) (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz, 2001), this is the time to emphasize self-development and self-care as important precursors to healthy, satisfying romantic relationships.
- Focus on issues related to self-development and identity formation by having adolescents engage in activities that help them explore their values, beliefs, interests, goals, talents, and skills.
- Compared to adults, adolescents are more impulsive in their actions (Kerpelman, 2007). Place special emphasis on how decisions made in the present affect the likelihood of being on track to reach future goals. Adolescents can engage in games or projects that help illustrate the importance of thinking through choices before engaging in actions.
- Social pressure situations that adolescents face also need to be addressed. During adolescence many youth wish to conform to their peer group. They can face enormous pressure to behave in certain ways to fit into their group (Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008). Sometime the behavior that is being encouraged may put the adolescent in physical or emotional jeopardy. Adolescents can be helped to deal with this pressure effectively if they are offered opportunities to discuss the pressures they face and given ways to deal with social pressure that help them to behave in ways that are in their best interests.
- Role models can help adolescents visualize what it looks like to engage in physical, social, and emotional behaviors that support self care.
- Emotion regulation is an important way to care for self (Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006), and with maturity becomes easier to employ. Some adolescents may find regulating their emotions challenging. Special attention should be paid to teaching adolescents skills they can use to help them self-soothe when they become angered or stressed. An adolescent can be highly vulnerable when a relationship ends and s/he was not the one to terminate the relationship – the adolescent may become depressed, angry, or even suicidal. It should not be forgotten that adolescents lack the experience adults have in living through break ups and managing difficult emotions.
- It is important to educate adolescents about establishing a solid support system to help them cope with personal and relationship struggles. Although some adolescents have a strong support system and merely need pointers on how to use the available support effectively, other adolescents lack such a system in their lives. For the latter group of adolescents, developing opportunities to help them form a supportive network among trustworthy adults and peers can facilitate these adolescents' capacities to engage in self care.
- It is important to help adolescents understand the role of sex in a healthy and committed relationship. Work with school and public health educators to integrate relationship education with sex education efforts.



Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University



Spiritual Wellness

While there are important distinctions between spirituality and religiosity (see Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012), for purposes of this brief chapter, the terms will be used interchangeably. Research shows that spiritual wellness is an important aspect of overall wellness (Coyle, 2002). Religion is important in the everyday lives of many Americans (Newport, 2011). Individuals who are more religious or spiritual are happier (Park et al., 2011), score higher on various measures of mental health (Unterrainer, Lewis, & Fink, 2012), demonstrate lower involvement with risky lifestyle choices and have higher levels of social support (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Couples who are dissimilar with respect to religious beliefs have demonstrated higher levels of conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002) whereas those who share religious orientations have higher levels of marital adjustment (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2012). Also, couples who pray for one another are more likely to be committed to and satisfied with their relationships (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008). While spirituality and religiosity can be manifested in a number of ways, whether it is meditation, participating in religious services, reading poetry in nature, prayer, etc., couples may help strengthen their relationship by investing in this domain of wellness (e.g., Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

Implications for Practice



- Encourage individuals to identify the stressors in their lives and consider how they typically cope with those stressors. Are any of the coping mechanisms unhealthy? If so, help the individual make an action plan for curbing that behavior and incorporating healthy coping into his/her life. Point out ways that partners and family members can support the person with carrying out the plan. Identify barriers to achieving these goals and the ways to get past them (e.g., ways to be physically active in a dangerous neighborhood; inexpensive ways to eat healthy).
- If a client is clearly struggling with mental or physical health issues, have an open conversation with them about this. Are they currently getting help for the problem? Do they need referrals to practitioners that can assist them? Be prepared to provide referrals to additional resources and community supports.
- Have couples think of ways that they can collectively encourage better mental and physical health within their families. If they do not get enough physical activity, have them list fun ways to incorporate this into their lives. If they are facing lots of stressors, have them identify ways to de-stress and relax that they would both/all be willing to try.

Conclusion

While a couple is a social unit – two people who agree to love and support each other – the individuals within the couple relationship remain just that – individuals. The functioning of individuals has important implications for the functioning of the couple. Caring for an intimate relationship includes caring for one's self. By taking care of one's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, that individual can better care for the relationship with his or her partner.



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Know

Maintaining Knowledge of Your Partner's World

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Kansas State University
Allen Barton, University of Georgia
Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia
David Schramm, University of Missouri

What Know Looks Like

- Asking about our partner's life, thoughts, and feelings
- Being sensitive to our partner's worries and needs
- Recalling positive experiences together
- Expressing sincere interest
- Seeing things through our partner's eyes
- Discussing what you expect in the relationship

Introduction

For the development of a strong, lasting relationship, knowledge must be built by partners both about the other and themselves (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009). *Know* refers to a never-ending process of developing knowledge and understanding about one's partner (e.g., sharing details about each other's day and becoming aware of each other's likes, dislikes, and background). *Know* also refers to taking the time to update each other on daily happenings and maintaining knowledge about each other as the months and years pass. This concept also includes a person's own willingness and ability to gain knowledge about one's self and to self-disclose and express this information with the partner. The *Know* domain has connections to the *Care* and *Share* domains described later. *Know* applies to both singles, who may be starting the process of getting to know potential dating partners, and couples, who might be working to maintain a healthy relationship and getting to know more about each other while maintaining knowledge of each other's daily lives.

Know Before You Go

For singles, *Know* applies to learning more about a potential partner to decide whether to date that person or begin a relationship with them (see *Choose*). Very few people would be willing to get into a car with a complete stranger. The individual would not know where the stranger was going, where they had been, whether or not they are a safe driver, or whether they could be a dangerous individual. Jumping into a relationship without knowing very much about someone is also dangerous, but many individuals try it. For many single parents, entering a relationship may be seen as a way to improve their situation, financially, practically, or emotionally (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Graefe & Lichter, 2002; Kathryn, 2000). Caution is warranted in not overlooking or downplaying risk factors





(substance abuse, violent tendencies, criminal history, etc.) when forming romantic relationships (Huang, Postmus, Vikse & Wang, 2013; Knight, 2011; Waller & Swisher, 2008). When deciding to enter a relationship with an individual, it is important to have some basic background knowledge to protect oneself and one's family.

Knowing As You Are Going

Those who are already in a relationship can also benefit from learning more about and maintaining an understanding of one's partner. Certain aspects that receive much attention at the start of the relationship, like physical attraction, appear to become less important to individuals' relationship satisfaction and support for one another over time (McNulty, Neff, & Karney, 2008). In addition, couples

who share accurate knowledge about each other tend to be more supportive of each other and have a more stable relationship (Neff & Karney, 2005). Just like going for a long time without talking to a friend or family member, couples can easily get out of touch when they do not make the time to communicate and learn about each other on a continual basis. Each individual in a partnership changes and grows over time and it is important that each partner is aware of these changes as well as day-to-day stresses and events in each other's lives. In some situations, however, it may be difficult to maintain open communication. For example, after a couple becomes new parents, whether biological, adoptive, or foster, the majority of their time and energy may be put into making sure the child's needs are met. This may lead to the couple losing touch with each other, spending less quality time together, and feeling less satisfied with their marriage (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003).

Developing Intimacy

Getting to *really* know one's partner is important throughout all stages of a relationship, but particularly during the initial stages. During dating and the early years of marriage, partners are more likely to idealize the other and ascribe qualities and characteristics that are more positive than is truly warranted (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). This concept, known as positive illusions, can help improve relationship satisfaction and stability. However, when positive illusions are too extreme and individuals fail to have a solid, robust understanding of the true nature of the other

Why Know Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- As single parents develop relationships with new partners, it is important for them to truly get to know potential partners so they can be sure they are not exposing their child(ren) to risk and are providing them a safe environment.
- New parents whether biological, foster, or adoptive parents need to focus a lot of attention on children as they become part of the family. As a result, couples may lose touch with one another during this time, which can be a source of stress and isolation, and consequently impact their relationship with each other and their child. Thus, parents may need reminders to stay in touch with what is going on in other aspects of their lives and focus on continuing to get to know one another through this transition.
- Parents who have long distance relationships (e.g., those in the military; those who are incarcerated) may struggle with maintaining those relationships from a distance. Consequently, when they are reunited, they may struggle with reconnecting. The stress put on their relationships can affect their parenting. To lessen the risk of losing touch and the stress created when they are reunited, these couples may need help establishing rituals for keeping in touch when they are apart.
- Parents who live together and those that live apart need to know and understand what each person believes is important when it comes to raising children. Knowing how the other person wants to raise your children is an important part of co-parenting.

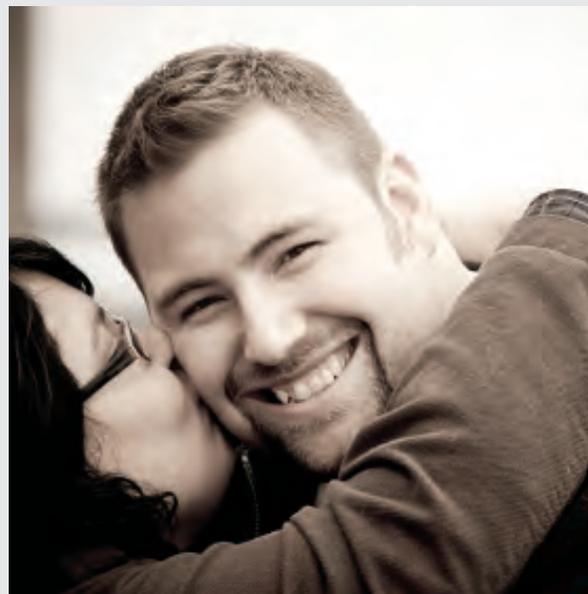
person and the skills that person brings to the relationship, detrimental effects can occur in relationships (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Love grounded in accurate perceptions and knowledge of the specific qualities of one's partner appears to result in stronger relationships than general global assessments (Neff & Karney, 2005). Knowledge about another individual must be rooted in reality, not idealized aspirations.

Stable and satisfying relationships result, in part, from a commitment to constantly learn about each other. An intimate knowledge base of one's partner has been found to be important for good communication and satisfying couple relationships (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2004). Furthermore, the more partners know about and understand each other's daily experiences, thoughts, feelings, needs, and dreams, the easier it is for a couple to develop an emotional connection (Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009). This commitment to learning entails an ever evolving curiosity about each other, sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings at appropriate times and places, and being intentional about allocating quality time to each other on a regular basis (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). True intimacy is built on truth, knowledge, and understanding of one's partner.

Commitment to Learning

Learning about a partner's preferences in daily life and using this knowledge in supportive and appreciative ways helps a couple turn toward each other, even during conflict. Gottman (1998) calls this process building "Love Maps" in which partners create a wealth of knowledge about each other and use it for relationship building. For instance, knowing and respecting a partner's preferences for expressing closeness and intimacy helps to maintain mutual interest, physical attraction, emotional closeness, and the likelihood that he/she will continue to express closeness in intimacy. Perhaps one partner often likes to physically touch as a sign of affection, whereas the other partner is a "hands-off" type. Learning about each other and incorporating this information into daily responses might allow the "hands off" partner to be more receptive to these types of bids for connection, while the other partner works at not feeling rejected when loving touches are rebuffed. Making a commitment to learn more and more about one's partner allows the couple to be able to understand each other better and support each other during times of need.

When partners get to know each other, they create the ability to see situations and events through each other's eyes. Knowing about each other's visions for the future, aspirations, and ways of doing things makes it possible to understand more of where the other is coming from, creating more understanding and helping couples to weather the inevitable storms (Gottman, 1998, 2011).



Understanding our partners: Making sense of things our partners do.

Attributions concern how individuals make sense and explain events, actions, and behaviors, both of ourselves and of our partner. These attributions inform what we believe we know about why a person acted a certain way or made a particular comment, and in turn influence our behavior (how we react) and overall marital quality (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Attributions can be either relationship-enhancing or distress-maintaining to a relationship. When one's partner does something positive, *relationship-enhancing attributions* view those actions as intentionally-performed by the person and reflecting more internal, stable characteristics. Relationship-enhancing attributions also interpret partners' negative behaviors as more unintentional, caused by some external, temporary circumstance. In contrast, *distress-maintaining attributions* ascribe positive events and behaviors to external, temporary, and unintentional factors, and attribute negative events and behaviors to internal, stable, and intentional factors (Horneffer & Fincham, 1996; Manusov & Koenig, 2001). By developing a better understanding of their partner, individuals can potentially make more accurate attributions or interpretations about a partner's relationship behaviors. When these attributions are relationship-enhancing, relationship well-being is strengthened.

Spending time together and communicating is the best way to build this knowledge (see *Share*). Couples can ask each other questions about their day, discuss positive experiences from the past and what they want in their future, talk about their daily stressors, and share what they need and expect for themselves and the relationship.

What Do Partners Need to Know?

While an individual will never know all there is about one's partner, having sufficient knowledge about certain areas is particularly important for relationship functioning and maintenance. Three important areas for knowledge about partners include: (1) relationship expectations, (2) core beliefs, and (3) family background experiences (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

Relationship Expectations

Every person enters into a relationship with a set of expectations for it. These expectations range from mundane, everyday matters (such as who will do the grocery shopping) to deep foundational issues (such as how decisions should be made). These expectations – and differences between partners about them – often appear as areas where conflict and disagreements arise in relationships. Specifically, marital expectations have been related to attributions for marital problems, problem-solving behaviors, and marital adjustment (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996).

Researchers have identified three broad domains of expectations that influence relationship quality (Baucom et al., 1996; Epstein & Baucom, 2002): boundary expectations, investment expectations, and control/power expectations. Expectations of *boundaries* refer to beliefs regarding the extent to which partners share time, activities, thoughts, and feelings. These also reflect how much independence versus interdependence appears between individuals in the relationship. For instance, a new wife may expect she and her husband to go out to eat every week together or watch the same television show, though the husband may not

have any of those expectations. Expectations of *investment* involve the standards for what each partner does and shares with the other person in the relationship. Such expectations shape thoughts for how much time one should devote to the relationship, from tasks ranging from washing dishes to sharing one's thoughts. Thirdly, expectations for *control/power* reflect beliefs about the role each individual has in the process and outcome of decision-making and allocating resources (Schwarzard, Kolowsky, & Izhak-Nir, 2008).

Given how pervasive these expectations are in relationships, a logical next question is to examine and understand from where these expectations originate. Markman, Stanley, and Bloomberg (2001) have identified three primary sources for the expectations individuals bring into relationships: families, previous relationships, and societal ideals.

- For better or worse, the marriage models experienced in one's family shape all of the domains of marital expectations (boundaries, investment, and control/power). For instance, regarding investment, a man who grew up in a family where the wife prepared nearly all of the family meals will likely unknowingly carry a similar expectation for his own wife. In regards to boundaries, a woman whose family was very loud and open in conversation with one another will have very different beliefs about how everyday conversations occur and how feelings are shared compared to a partner with a quiet, withdrawn family.
- Previous relationships also shape expectations. Such relationships often provide a script or schema for the expected progression stages of a relationship and what behaviors and reactions can be expected by a partner (Surra & Bohman, 1991). Past relationship experiences create models for expectations of events that partners then carry with them into present relationships. This may be especially true for those in remarriages.
- Societal ideals – from media, culture, ethnic backgrounds, etc. – also come to shape the expectations individuals have towards relationships. Most movies, television shows, and music lyrics all offer some sort of blueprint or belief about relationships, which can very easily become expectations of people exposed to them. Studies linking the exposure to media and its impacts on relationship behaviors support this (e.g. Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005).



Core Beliefs

A second key area to know and understand involves the core beliefs of each partner. Regardless of whether a person self-identifies as being religious, every person possesses a core set of beliefs and values that shape how they view the world. Such core principles relate to beliefs and values about what makes life meaningful and purposeful, what issues are important, and what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable. In many relationships, these topics are rarely discussed between partners, though their impact on a relationship is inevitable (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

On average, research suggests that similarity in core beliefs – often identified by similar religious or spiritual beliefs and participation – leads to more positive relationship outcomes, such as higher marital satisfaction and lower rates of divorce (see Mahoney, 2010). Couples will not agree on everything, and couples with different beliefs are not inevitably bound to failure; however, core beliefs do need to be known, and differences should be acknowledged and discussed.



What to Know: The 10 P's

1. **Personality:** What are your partner's qualities and characteristics?
2. **Passions:** What are their interests? What do they really care about?
3. **Plans and Priorities:** What hopes and dreams do they have for their life? Where do they see themselves in 10 years?
4. **Previous Partners:** What do you know about your partner's past relationships and experiences within those relationships?
5. **Perspective Taking:** How good is your partner at seeing things from someone else's point of view? Does it come naturally for them to be empathetic?
6. **Problem Solving:** How do they manage conflict and disagreement?
7. **Past Family Experiences:** Find out about the dynamics and interactions within their family of origin.
8. **Physical/Psychological Health:** How is your partner feeling today?
9. **Parenting Experience and Approach:** Does your partner want kids? What type of parent would they like to be?
10. **Provider Potential:** Will your partner be able to help provide for your needs as a couple?

Family of Origin and Emotional Heritage

As previously noted, experiences in one's family of origin have a significant influence in shaping relationship expectations. Yet, influences from family background extend beyond relationship expectations. Overall, research findings suggest a connection between family background experiences and one's beliefs and behaviors in later adult romantic relationships (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2011). For instance, the nature of parenting received as a child appears to influence later levels of warmth and hostility in romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Gottman, 2011).

As another example, experiencing parental divorce can have many influences on children, both during childhood and adulthood. Children of divorce have comparatively weaker normative commitments to the institution of marriage and a slightly increased risk of divorce in their own relationships (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

Another family of origin issue to consider is how well differentiated individuals are from their family-of-origin. Healthy adult relationships are more likely when individuals have a strong, distinct sense of self and identity (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011). Well-differentiated individuals are able to maintain appropriate degrees of connection with family members, while those who lack this often struggle with maintaining a healthy degree of separateness from their family of origin. Although past family experiences do not entirely determine later behavior, getting to know one's partner clearly involves an awareness of his/her past experiences.

Additionally, each person's emotional heritage impacts intimate partner relationships. Rooted in one's



family of origin, a person's "emotional heritage" involves the emotional beliefs and practices experienced when a child, including how the family expressed, valued, and handled emotions (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Illustrative of this, brain research is showing that past experiences and feelings, whether pleasant or painful, accumulate within the brain processes to influence current and future emotional connections (Roberts & Koval, 2003). Fixed interaction patterns to specific cues become established over time, but are believed to be malleable to change when one becomes aware of personal emotional history. This can be especially important when these patterns are harmful to building emotional connections with one's intimate partner (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). If a past experience sparks something in one's memory and the partner does not know the circumstances, then this can lead to communication breakdown. For instance, during childhood, one partner may have experienced his or her family's bankruptcy, which could have resulted in negative consequences, including moving away from close friends and family members. If the partner suggests taking out a loan to remodel their home without knowing this history, the reaction could be stonewalling (i.e. changing the subject, walking away from conversation, refusing to talk, etc.). The cue that shuts down communication for one partner is borrowing money. Only when both partners understand this past emotional history

Cultural Considerations

- Reciprocal self-disclosure may not be comfortable or possible for couples whose culture supports traditional roles. Men and women do not have equal power in all cultural groups, and may not be allowed or feel comfortable sharing feelings about pressures, needs, hopes, and dreams (Allen & Beitin, 2007; Walsh, 2012). For example, Asian cultures may be influenced by Confucianism where emphasis is placed on hierarchical relationships with men having the highest position of power in the family, and women may not feel comfortable sharing feelings (Ishii-Kuntz, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2008).
- Intimacy may be viewed as very complex by people in some cultures, and may be dependent upon several factors related to personal well-being. American Indian tribes view the mind, body, and spirit as interconnected (Sue & Sue, 2008). Asian Americans also view the mind and body as inseparable and emotional stress may manifest itself in physical symptoms rather than being discussed with one's partner. Intimacy, therefore, in couple relationships, may be more dependent on these components than on self-disclosure.
- Harmony and cooperation are highly valued by some cultures, and it may be culturally inappropriate to raise issues about things that might result in conflict. American Indian tribes often promote cooperation, with the tribe and family needs taking precedence over sharing individual needs (Sue & Sue, 2008). According to these authors, harmonious interpersonal relationships are also highly valued in Asian American culture and directness or sharing feelings that might cause conflict are often avoided.

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

about family finances can they overcome this block to emotional connection.

Developing awareness about one's partner is essential to developing intimacy, trust, and commitment in the relationship. Also, it is important to recognize that it is not only helpful to develop knowledge about one's partner, but also about *oneself*. It is helpful for an individual to get in touch with his or her own relationship expectations, core beliefs, and family of origin influences as equally well as they do their partner's.

Self-Disclosure and Partner Responsiveness

Individuals only get to know their partner to the degree that the other person allows himself or herself to be known. Accordingly, healthy self-disclosure becomes another important aspect for the practice of *knowing* in a relationship. Closely associated with self-disclosure is the concept of partner responsiveness, which facilitates greater knowledge being built into a relationship. These constructs also relate to the *Care* and *Share* dimensions.

Self-disclosure describes the process of verbally communicating information about oneself that is not common knowledge to everyone. Self-disclosure can occur regarding personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Informally, this is often described as opening up and putting one's guard down and is important for *knowing* to occur and healthy relationships to be built. As Harvey and Omarzu (1997) describe, "a never-ending reciprocal knowing process involving a complex package of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors represents an essential condition for creating and sustaining closeness in mutually satisfying relationships" (p. 224). Self-disclosure helps determine the quality and characteristics of relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Additionally, the process of self-disclosure helps each partner move from superficial and idealized information to a more intimate and in-depth understanding of the other.

Equally important to self-disclosure is the nature of partner responsiveness (or lack thereof) in encouraging or discouraging ongoing self-disclosure. For example, when one person shares thoughts and feelings about the day's events, the other person can respond by asking questions and self-disclosing information about his/her day. This encourages the first person to respond back with more personal information, questions, and so forth. The flow of information back and forth contributes to how well partners know each other, which helps foster the relationship closeness (Dindia, 2000, 2002). In contrast, if one person shares information and receives no caring response, whether verbally or non-verbally, self-disclosure most likely will be hindered and the opportunity for relationship building will have been missed. This feedback loop includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as persons "leak" signs about their thoughts and feelings, even if no words are spoken (Harvey & Omarzu, 1999). Finally, the reciprocal nature of a positive self-disclosure environment helps a person learn more about one's self as the partner listens, observes, and asks questions, creating an environment for self-reflection during the exchange.

Intimacy, a sense of being connected to each other even if it is brief, is an outcome of the transactional nature of self-disclosure and positive partner responsiveness (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004;

Working with Youth

- Adolescence is a period of development where young people are still learning about themselves (Schwartz, 2001). In general, adolescents need help to get to know themselves, focusing on the development of identity, talents, interests, values, and future goals. Note the importance of getting to know oneself – establishing a clear sense of personal identity as part of a healthy relationship (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2008).
- Many adolescents have a superficial understanding of what intimacy within a romantic relationship involves. Review with youth the different types of intimacy and emphasize aspects of intimacy that go beyond the physical.
- Adolescents may be overly concerned with acceptance within a relationship and at the same time fearful of rejection (Kerpelman et al., 2012). They often have limited experience within romantic relationships and may be uncomfortable sharing who they truly are with a romantic partner. Adolescent romantic relationships can be as much about social status as they are about companionship.
- Many adolescents may feel awkward when attracted to someone and have difficulty knowing what steps to take to learn about the other person or how to share information about themselves. Have adolescents engage in different learning activities that demonstrate for them different ways to get to know a person.
- Trust is something built in a relationship over time (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010); some adolescents may disclose highly personal information that they later regret because the recipient of that disclosure betrays their trust. Helping adolescents understand the process for gradually disclosing within a relationship is often needed. Have them consider what kinds of information they should learn about a potential partner, such as values, interests, ways of handling disagreements, past relationship patterns, and family relationships.

Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University

Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Consistent with this, self-disclosure on the part of both partners has been found to be a significant predictor of intimacy, with partner's responsiveness also being crucial (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Furthermore, disclosing positive personal experiences increases everyday positive affect and enhances relationship well-being. These benefits are even greater if the listener reacts in a constructive way to the positive message (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). The process of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness can build intimacy at multiple levels in a relationship, including physically, cognitively, affectively, and relationally (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Moss & Schwebel, 1993).

It must be remembered, however, that social norms and cultural expectations impact a person's willingness and comfort level with self-disclosure (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). For example, perhaps one partner was raised in an environment where stoicism (i.e., having an indifference to pain or pleasure) was highly valued and there was an expectation that highly personal information should not be revealed. In contrast, the other partner might have grown up in a family where emotional reactions were expected to be shared and discussed with each other as an indication of familial love and support. Couples who work together to find a healthy level of self-disclosure that both partners feel comfortable with can reach a level of knowledge that is healthy for the couple relationship.

Conclusion

Learning about each other takes time, but doing so will help to establish an initial level of closeness and develop greater intimacy within a relationship. This process is also ongoing and may change over time. Life is not static, thus the need for learning about one's partner never ends. As people face each day's challenges and joys, their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, hopes, and dreams do not necessarily stay the same. Therefore, it can never be assumed that persons will know all they need to know about their partners. The process for getting to know one another will be different in the beginning of a relationship compared to years down the road – it may become less scripted, but it needs to occur at some level for a well-connected relationship (Gottman, 1998; Gottman, Schwartz Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). For example, dating couples and young married couples may have more time to devote to sharing

Implications for Practice



- Encourage couples to become better friends. Ask them how they became acquainted as friends and have them try to use some of those same strategies with each other with the goal of deepening their understanding of one another.
- Create activities that allow couples to recall and share the story of how they met, fell in love, and began their relationship. For example, have couples bring in photos and create scrapbooks that tell their story.
- Have couples establish a daily routine for continually getting to know one another. This could be sharing daily highlights at meal times, calling each other during breaks, or using car rides to fill each other in about the day's events. Encourage couples to spend 10-15 minutes every day getting to know each other better.
- Model positive partner responsiveness during meetings and conversations. Try to get to know your clients better by asking them to share information about themselves. When they share something, respond with interest and enthusiasm.
- Encourage single parents to move slowly into new relationships as they get to know new partners. Help them explore important things to learn about new partners and the influence of their relationship choices on children's safety and well-being.

the day's happenings and learning how each of them responds to the world around them. A couple with children may struggle to find as much time and thus would have to become more deliberate, giving themselves as much time as possible (e.g., 15 minutes at the end of the day) to do the same. However, an older married couple may be less scripted, but still very intentional in checking in with each other and observing how the other is feeling and acting, not slipping into "alone" lives within the marriage.



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Care

Using Nurturing, Caring, and Affectionate Behaviors

Wally Goddard, University of Arkansas
Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University
David Schramm, University of Missouri
Andrew Behnke, North Carolina State University

What Care Looks Like

- Expressing kindness through caring actions
- Being open and listening to your partner
- Focusing on the good in your partner
- Accepting and valuing differences
- Giving love in the way your partner likes to be loved
- Showing appreciation
- Making time for togetherness

Introduction

When two people are dating seriously and beginning to suspect that their relationship is special, each partner commonly invests a lot of energy into the relationship. Each person shows his or her caring in a different way. Some may write notes, buy small gifts, or offer small kindnesses. Others may call, provide treats, or just hang out with the other person. While the feverish pace of early love may settle into a steadier pattern of affection over time, the need for continuing investment in a relationship never goes away – even after years of marriage.

In general, *Care* focuses on the value of kindness, understanding, respect, and caring support as a core in the creation and maintenance of stable, healthy marriage and couple relationships

(Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012). *Care* is distinct from the dimension of *Share* in that it emphasizes the behaviors that a person can invest in the relationship independent of the partner's behaviors or readiness to reciprocate. *Care* includes two primary practices: keeping a positive orientation toward a partner and engaging in relationship-building activities. The first practice emphasizes the vital role of thoughts and feelings. The second practice describes behaviors that can strengthen a relationship. Following these recommended practices is not easy and requires intentional effort (see *Choose*). When we work at a practice, we do it imperfectly, but doing more of the practices described in this chapter can make a relationship stronger. Even taking one practice and doing it better can make a difference.



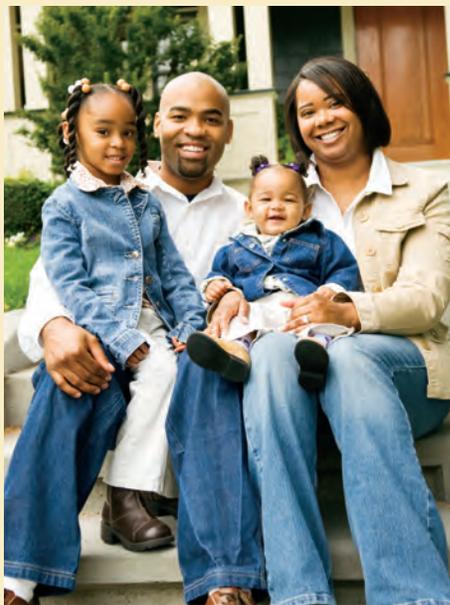
Cultivating Positivity

Cultivating positivity in couple relationships may be one of the most important factors in the well-being of a relationship. Happily married spouses engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of mutually positive perceptions that encourage positive interactions, which in turn foster positive perceptions (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996;



Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Distressed spouses engage in the opposite pattern, emphasizing negative perceptions of each other and aversive interactions. Spouses need to continually work to maintain the positivity in their relationships. The use of positivity, assurances, and cooperation are strongly related to relationship quality for both husbands and wives (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Even during a challenging day, each partner can *Choose to Care* for their spouse by showing compassion and empathy.

When people give more to the relationship than their partner expects, relationship prospects are strengthened.



Why *Care* Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- When parents become comfortable with demonstrating *Care* to their partners, they may also be more likely to do so toward their children. Caring is about making a point to support and attempt to connect with those we love. This can occur between couples, as well as parents and children. This may be an especially important skill for parents in the child welfare system to learn since many of them may have lacked good role models.
- When children see their parents expressing care for one another or for a new partner, they learn how to do so themselves. The same is true for maintaining a positive perspective. Children in high risk families may benefit from learning how to care for others and focus on the positive. For example, these behaviors may spill over into sibling relations and prompt stronger bonds.

In fact, in one study, the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction was the extent to which the partner's use of assurances and positivity exceeded expectations for these activities (Dainton, 2000). In many relationships, each person waits for the other to be positive and encouraging. Yet each person can invest in the relationship independent of the partner's contribution. Such contributions may readily draw the partner into investing in the relationship as suggested by Fowers and associates (1996, 2011). Yet even in those cases, when a partner does not respond in kind, the person who invests in the relationship is taking a stand for caring and goodness.

Give Five Positives for Each Negative

Gottman (1994) summarized a key discovery of his extensive research when he observed that "we have found that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula: no matter what style your marriage follows, you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable" (p.29). A wealth of positive feelings – described as positive sentiment override – can help a couple deal with marital challenges (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). While there will always be some irritations and challenges in the best of relationships, each partner can individually choose to notice and appreciate the good in his or her relationship. Positivity has a vital role in sustaining a relationship.

Keeping a Positive Orientation Toward One's Partner

Elements of relationships can be divided into three parts: (1) things that an individual likes about his or her partner, (2) things that an individual dislikes about his or her partner, but cannot be changed, and (3) things that an individual dislikes about his or her partner but can be discussed and changed for the good of the relationship (Gottman, 2011). Generally, on most days, it is common for individuals to like about 80% of things about his or her partner. This means that there are 80% of things that they do not want to change about their partner. Of the other 20%, commonly, 70% of things one dislikes about their partner will not change, no matter how much the individual nags or complains (Gottman, 1994). The other 30%, generally, will only change when their partner focuses on the good. Focusing on the things that cannot change can give the individual a negative mindset and lead to less marital satisfaction (Gottman, 2011). Focusing on the things that are disliked but can be changed needs to be discussed in a healthy way in order for it to benefit both partners and to strengthen the relationship. Those individuals who focus on the things they like about their partner are more satisfied and may create a positivity cycle (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Gottman, 2011).

Notice and Remember Positive Moments in the Relationship

Positive illusions, or unrealistically optimistic or biased views of another person, have positive effects. People are happier in their relationships when they idealize their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In fact, a certain amount of idealization may be essential to satisfying marital relationships. When happily married people's perceptions of their partners are compared to the self-perceptions of that person and perceptions by close friends, the partner's perceptions are higher. Happily married spouses are said to have benevolent bias, meaning they see more virtue in their partners than others see (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000). There are several practical things that people can do to sustain their positive perceptions. In fact, Gottman (1994) recommends that partners become the architects of their own thoughts. He suggests that couples look through family photo albums or reread old love letters to stir up memories of good times together. People can also develop and memorialize lists of qualities they see in their partners.



Helping Couples Identify Positives

- Point out positive things they are doing.
- Reframe “weaknesses” as areas for growth.
- Help them let some negatives slide without comment or dwelling on past problems.
- Help them recognize that even small, positive steps are still moving them in the right direction.
- Suggest they take pictures of great moments so they can reminisce later and share with others.

Take a Positive View of Human Nature, Attributing Problems to Temporary Causes and Positives to Stable Causes

Almost any behavior can be interpreted in ways that assume good intent or foul intent in the actor. The more that a person holds cynical, suspicious, and negative views of human nature the more likely they are to be vulnerable to the effects of stress (Graham & Conoley, 2006). Positive or benign interpretations of partner behavior are good for a relationship (Fincham & Bradbury, 2004) while cynical hostility may be associated with physiological distress in husbands (Smith & Brown, 1991). There is evidence that humans tend to see other people in extreme categories – as good or evil (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). It is not uncommon for stress in marriage to activate a cascade of negative appraisals (Fincham & Bradbury, 2004). When humans, in general, and romantic partners, in particular, make allowances for the circumstances that cause even good people to act in imperfect ways, they are more likely to sustain a caring relationship.

Show Empathy or Compassion (Rather Than Irritation and Anger) Toward Partner’s Struggles and Limitations

Sprecher & Fehr (2005) defined compassionate love as:

“An attitude toward other(s) . . . containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need (p. 630).

Research has found a strong relationship between a partner's empathic perspective taking and both emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction (e.g., Cramer, 2003; Schutte et al., 2001). The ability to understand a partner's pain and show compassion is a part of healthy relationships. In fact, the lack of compassion in relationships may be the most common reason couples seek the help of family therapists (Stosny, 2004). When partners choose to see each other with empathy and compassion, they are more likely to sustain a caring relationship.

Cultural Considerations

- The consequences of living in poverty may affect one's ability to care for one's partner. Living with limited resources means extensive energy needs are directed at working and providing basic needs for the couple or the family. This creates a heavy weight for individuals and often results in stress, exhaustion, frustration, and less energy available to care for others (Rank, 2000).
- Supportive behaviors are likely to be different among differing ethnic groups. Couples from different cultures will show care for each other in culturally relevant ways. For example, a Navajo couple may nurture each other by using terms of endearment such as "my wife" or "my husband" or by doing a service project for their in-laws (Skogrand et al., 2007). Whereas, a Latino couple, where the family is as important as the couple relationship, may want to plan a very special time and include the entire family (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2009).

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

Engage in Pro-Relationship Behaviors

In addition to the management of thoughts and feelings described in the preceding section, there are behaviors that are vitally important for maintaining and strengthening a relationship. As before, the behaviors described in this section are those that either person can undertake with or without partner participation.

Express Love in Ways That are Meaningful to Your Partner

Central to the dimension of *Care* is nurturing the relationship. Nurturing can be defined as acting in ways that the partner considers to be warm, supportive, and caring (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). Individuals have different ways that they like to be loved or supported. This is because each person may have a different understanding of what communicates love based on their own background and experiences. Popular literature describes languages of love (See Chapman, 1995) that are based on the concept of shared meaning, which is vital in healthy relationships (Gottman, 1994; Phillips, Bishoff, Abbott, & Xia, 2009). It makes sense that our efforts to show love must be tuned to

our partners' preferences if they are to be effective. In couple relationships, it is meaningful for one partner to understand the other's needs or preferences regarding expressions of love (see *Know*) and then personalize or customize their messages of love for that person. Research with couples shows that their awareness of each other's needs and preferences in the relationship is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction and quality (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000).

Recognize and Respond Positively to Bids for Connection

Gottman (1999; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) has described the vital importance of partners turning toward each other. Bids for connection are described as "a gesture, a look, a touch – any single expression that says, 'I want to feel connected to you'" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, p. 4). In response to bids for connection, some people turn away or turn against their partners. Such actions can lead to the spiral of negativity in the relationship (Gottman, 2011). Yet when partners turn toward each other (see *Share*), the relationship is strengthened (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). One of the challenges in responding to bids for connection is that they may often be very subtle and go unnoticed by the partner. A simple observation by one person may be an invitation to a discussion or a testing of the waters for deeper discussion. While no person can guess the thoughts and intentions of his or her partner, each person can be open to the wealth of invitations behind simple words and gestures. When in doubt, a person can ask about the meaning of words or actions.

Proactively and Unconditionally Show Affection and Appreciation

Gottman (1999) observed that reciprocal exchanges of positive behavior are not the basis of healthy relationships. "Not only aren't happy marriages characterized by the quid pro quo, but it actually characterizes unhappy marriages! Unhappy couples are the ones who keep tabs on positives given and received, whereas happy couples are positive unconditionally" (p. 12). This discovery leads directly to the recommendation at the heart of the *Care* dimension – that each person shows affection and appreciation without waiting for the partner to earn it (also see *Choose*).

Make Time for Shared Talk and Activities

Building a strong relationship requires a commitment of time together (see *Choose* and *Share*). The investment of time in shared activities is a significant predictor of marital satisfaction (Russell-Chapin, Chapin, & Sattler, 2001). According to one study, the most important

determinant of women's marital happiness is the emotional engagement of their husbands (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). While much research on American marriages has focused on the division of housework and paid work – who does what inside and outside the home – new research, by contrast, shows wives care most about how affectionate and understanding their husbands are, and how much quality time they spend with their husbands (Lee & Waite, 2010). Strong relationships are built on shared time and talk (see *Share*).

Support Your Partner During Times of Challenge or Frustration

Supportive behaviors, both real and imagined, are associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003). When an individual faces challenges and frustrations, his/her partner has the opportunity to provide support, understanding, compassion, and encouragement. Rather than challenges in either partner's life being seen as a problem, they can be seen as an opportunity to draw close and to support each other.

Responding in Positive Manner to Negative Events

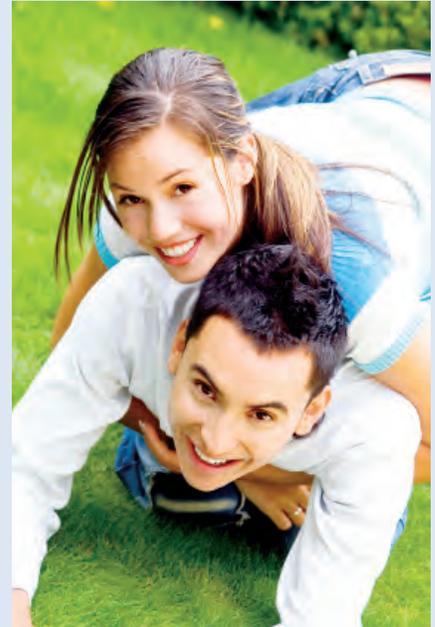
In all relationships, each partner will inevitably do or say something to cause the other person to become upset, irritated, or annoyed. This may be forgetting an important date, making a critical remark, or not spending enough time with the partner. When an individual has engaged in a potentially destructive behavior, partners who accommodate – willingly inhibit impulses to react destructively and instead react constructively – have relationships with greater couple functioning and satisfaction (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Showing Appreciation and Gratitude

Making sure each partner feels valued and appreciated – through both behaviors and words – has a powerful effect on relationships (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012). Spouses who feel a greater sense of gratitude from their partners possess much higher levels of marital satisfaction, and this felt gratitude can even offset impacts on relationship quality caused by poor

Working with Youth

- Adolescents can benefit by seeing the parallels between care in committed relationships and marriages in adulthood and how they care for, and are cared for by, family members and friends. Focus on the concept of care broadly: care for other family members, care for friends, care for dating partners.
- Youth also need to understand that care does not mean giving up who you are to please the other person or meet the other person's needs. Rather, care is a mutual part of a healthy relationship (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). Emphasize a balance of care for others with a *care for self*.
- It is normal for youth to be self-focused; adolescence is a time of identity formation and self-development (Kerpelman et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2001). Acknowledge with youth that it is not selfish to be self-focused at this time in their lives, since this is a time of making important decisions about life goals. Balance this message with the importance of having empathy for others. Help adolescents build empathy for others – engage youth in empathy building activities and projects.
- Offer role models to show adolescents what healthy, caring relationships look like. Be aware that some youth may not live in families where they experience or observe caring relationships.
- Help adolescents develop communication skills through activities and role plays that convey appreciation and caring. Teach adolescents skills for communicating about interpersonal conflict in ways that help to nurture growth and understanding within their relationships.



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communication (Barton, 2013). When couples struggle with daily household chores and similar matters, it is seldom over who does what, but over the giving and receiving of gratitude (see Hochschild, 1990; Nock 2011).

Conclusion

By practicing *Care*, couples can increase the joy in their relationship. When each individual in the relationship focuses on the positives of their partner and the relationship, is supportive, makes time for their partner, shows affection unconditionally, shows love to their partner in a way that the partner enjoys, and makes and responds to bids for connection, a cycle of positivity can begin and continue. These expressions of positivity have been described as being synonymous to making *deposits in the partner's emotional "bank account"* (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When the couple experiences hard times, conflict, and stress in their relationship, investments made into the emotional

Implications for Practice



- Ask clients to share happy memories of time spent with their partners or families. Ask them to describe why the experience was positive and what their partners did to contribute to it.
- Ask clients what they love about their partners and what characteristics they fell in love with when they first started the relationship. Follow up by asking clients to recall and describe a specific instance when they felt love and affection for the partner. Encourage them to share this example with their partners when they see them next.
- Have clients identify activities that they could engage in with their partners that would help them recall positive memories and happy times spent together (e.g., looking through family photo albums, re-reading old love letters, talking about an important event).
- Have partners each make a list of actions that would make them feel loved. Have them share their lists with one another so they better understand what each can do to make the other feel more loved.
- Help clients view good things as permanent and bad things as temporary.
- Have clients begin to actively express appreciation to their partner. Have them strive to do and say something that expresses gratitude to their partner daily.

bank account can help maintain a positive outlook on the situation (see *Manage*). While many couples begin their relationship with practicing *Care*, it is important that *Care* – and deposits into the emotional bank account – be regularly maintained.



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HDFS-E-157



Share

Developing and Maintaining a Couple Identity

Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University
James Marshall, University of Arkansas
David Schramm, University of Missouri
Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia

What *Share* Looks Like

- Scheduling meaningful time together
- Finding common interests and activities
- Creating couple traditions and rituals
- Working towards common goals
- Nurturing positive interactions
- Sending clear and positive messages
- Turning toward partner's bids for connection
- Envisioning yourselves as a team

Introduction

A powerful, yet simple, idea lies at the heart of couple relationships and marriage: *the sum of two standing together is greater than one standing alone*. Whether it is called love or friendship or “we-ness,” this idea of the power of two lives shared and bonded together as a couple encompasses the concept of *Share*. The dimension of *Share* embraces the idea that trust, friendship, and love shared by two people is at the heart of meaningful, enduring couple relationships (Gottman, 1994; Harris, Skogrand, & Hatch, 2008).

Unlike *Care*, which focuses on what the individual can do to better the relationship, *Share* emphasizes what couples can do together to promote couple well-being. It takes the efforts of both partners to share with each other and to create a friendship. *Share* is about what a couple learns together, who they become together, and how they grow in love together. In a society that highlights autonomy and glorifies individualism, couples face particular challenges in establishing the time and trust they need for an enduring friendship framed by love (Doherty, 2001; Szinovacz, 1996). A recent groundbreaking book by Paul Amato and his colleagues, *Alone Together*, charts the transformation away from strong, institutional marriages based on mutual commitment toward weaker, individualistic marriages centered on personal fulfillment (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Amato and his colleagues argue that over time “self-development and personal fulfillment came to replace mutual satisfaction and successful team effort as the basis of marriage” (2007, p. 16).

The *Share* dimension of a couple relationship emphasizes that being a couple, at its heart, is about sharing their lives and developing a close, enduring friendship. While feelings of romance or passion may grow or diminish at different times in a relationship, friendship has the capacity to provide an enduring and stable base for couples over time. It is a process that engages both partners as they explore how to share their lives and how to be meaningful companions to each other. *Share* comprises at least three critical elements that foster the development and maintenance of a close and positive friendship and identity as a couple: (1) spending meaningful time together that builds the relationship, (2) fostering a shared sense of couple identity (“we-ness”), and (3) nurturing continuing and positive interactions with one’s partner.



Spend Meaningful Time Together

Couples need to give quality attention and care to their relationships each day, as they also keep busy with work or other activities. Some authors have noted that when couples fail to intentionally make time to be together, they naturally drift apart, which they refer to as the “natural drift toward isolation” (Rainey & Rainey, 2003). Time together has been noted as a key issue in couple and marriage relationships from early in their development (Brotherson & Moen, 2011; Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2005). Important aspects of meaningful time together include supporting each other in common interests or activities, spending time together in ways that build intimacy and trust, and engaging in couple traditions that strengthen the relationship.

Engage in and Support Each Other in Common Interests and Activities

If you are going to live with someone in a committed relationship, common sense suggests that you need to do more than love them – you need to learn how to *like* them. Two practices that can aid couples in building a friendship and learning to enjoy each other are (1) engaging in common activities together, and (2) supporting each other’s interests and pursuits. Research on this topic is quite interesting. First, research shows that couples who engage regularly in activities like working on home projects or visiting friends also tend to be happier in their marriages or relationships (Zuo, 1992). However, this does not always mean doing activities together. Relationships also benefit when one partner supports the other in interests, such as when a husband stays home with children so his spouse can go shopping with a friend. Additionally, it is important for couples to support each other and not simply do what one partner likes to do (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002). What is most important is not simply doing things together, but *how* they are done together. Being positive and supportive of each other (see *Care*), whether doing an activity together or just supporting a partner’s interests, are key ingredients to this aspect of building a friendship (Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001).

Spend Time Together that Builds Intimacy and Trust as Partners

There is a difference between time spent “hanging out” together and time that builds genuine trust and intimacy in a couple relationship. Couples must work to share not only their affection, but their time, and do so in ways that add to the quality of the relationship. Research suggests that married couples have higher relationship quality if they spend substantive amounts of time together and if each spouse feels valued and appreciated during their time together (Russell-Chapin, Chapin, & Sattler, 2001; Szinovacz,



1996). Time spent together that is enjoyable and interactive tends to build greater trust and intimacy in the relationship. Examples of this practice might include daily conversations over a morning cup of coffee or reserving one or two nights a week exclusively for couple time.

Participate in Couple Traditions that Strengthen the Relationship

A couple tradition is an interaction with one’s spouse or partner that is repeated, coordinated, and meaningful to both persons (Doherty, 2001). Couples benefit as they establish and participate in couple traditions that add meaning to their relationship (Fiese et al., 2002). Many married couples seem to lose their closeness and friendship through the logistics of everyday living. Some relationship and marriage educators encourage couples not to get lost in day to day logistics, but rather to grow their marital or couple friendship intentionally by establishing connection routines and rituals in everyday life (Doherty, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

- *Couple routines* represent re-occurring activities or daily habits between two individuals. For example, couples may make a point to kiss each other hello and goodbye. By establishing such routines, couples make sure they are able to maintain a connection despite other commitments (e.g., being apart from each other when working). These instances help remind individuals that they are valued and appreciated, and allow for greater intimacy, trust, and connection between partners.
- *Couple rituals* represent more formal ceremonies or occasions that couples celebrate or engage in on a regular basis. These rituals can be connected to past events in the relationship (e.g.,

anniversaries), each individual's life (e.g., getting a raise at work or some other accomplishment), or national or religious holidays. The observance of meaningful traditions is positively linked with relationship satisfaction.

Several studies have shown couples' observance of meaningful traditions, whether shared daily practices or celebratory events and holidays, is positively linked with couple relationship satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Szinovacz, 1996). Couple traditions can range from everyday interactions (e.g., chatting over breakfast in the morning or taking an evening walk together) to annual events (e.g., celebrating an anniversary or birthday in a meaningful way). Importantly, both partners must make an intentional effort (see *Choose*) to understand what activities and events bring meaning to each partner and the relationship (see *Know*) and to schedule time to engage in those activities and events together.

For many couples, there are a number of "time robbers" that get in the way of spending meaningful time together and establishing traditions and rituals of connections. These may include the demands of work, children, conflicting schedules, television, mobile devices and Internet, and even personal hobbies. If regular couple time is not scheduled and made a priority, other things will inevitably consume that special time.

Why Share Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- Engaging in shared rituals and routines can help children feel a sense of normalcy, even during stressful times. For example, taking time to celebrate a birthday or holiday can give children a break from otherwise stressful times. In addition, such celebrations can help foster the bond between parents and children and create positive memories of their own.
- When parents decide to introduce children to a new partner, they can also help to foster a strong bond between them by creating rituals within that relationship that are special to the child(ren) and partner.
- Helping parents feel supported and fostering open and positive communications can assist co-parents in working together as a team to meet their child's needs.

Foster a Shared Sense of Couple Identity

While individuals maintain their identities in a healthy relationship, a strong couple relationship is also characterized by a sense of shared meaning and identity as a couple (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). This sense of couple identity, or "we-ness," allows couples to establish who they are together and what defines their couple relationship. For example, couples with a shared sense of identity may strongly value an emphasis on a healthy, active lifestyle or enjoy a daily tradition of watching a favorite television program together. Couples who are able to move from "you and I" to a sense of "us" benefit from the shared unity this provides for their relationship (Honeycutt, 1999).

Identify Shared Values and Goals to Direct the Relationship

Establishing some common ground and loyalty is important as couples learn to share not only their lives but a sense of identity that unites them. What will they be mutually committed to? Values or goals shared by a couple tend to have a binding effect and allow them to focus their relationship in a common direction (Helms-Erikson, 2001; Kaplan & Maddux, 2002). Goals that a couple might establish and share include deciding to save together to purchase a new home, or couples with children might talk about the particular values they want to pass on to their children. Spouses or partners with large differences in their attitudes, values, or goals may run into relationship difficulties because they tend to think about the relationship and its future from different perspectives (Kurdek, 1993).

Engage Together in Common Purposes

The common purposes that unite a couple aid them in forging the sense of couple identity and "we-ness" that can provide lasting stability and satisfaction. The importance of common purposes is further referenced in the *Connect* dimension, but here we suggest that common purposes help to establish the "common ground" a couple needs to



feel they are working together at something larger than themselves. For example, research suggests the stabilizing relationship value of shared religious commitments may reflect this pattern of “common ground” between partners (Call & Heaton, 1997). Also, research on the transition to parenthood shows that couples who are united in their commitment to become parents at a particular time have much more stable relationships than couples who cannot agree on the common purpose of becoming parents (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Lawrence et al., 2008). A marriage or couple relationship allows partners to work together to bring important aims and ideals to life. Couples in healthy marriages have goals and ideals that give their marriages purpose and meaning. A good marriage or couple relationship can be built on the pursuit of any number of worthy goals, such as: raising responsible children; being actively involved in the community, school, or church; caring for the environment; or developing shared talents and using them in the service of others.

Protect the Relationship From Negative or Disruptive Influences

A healthy couple relationship is defined not only by what couples do together, but also to a degree by the things they limit in their relationship. This can include influences both within and outside of the relationship. For example, couples can benefit as they promise to limit negative influences within their relationship, such as using “divorce threats” on each other if relationship challenges occur. Additionally, couples may also benefit as they define limits on outside influences that might affect their relationship, such as efforts by in-laws to speak ill of a partner or spouse. Couples who let others know they are loyal to each other and their relationship send a message their “we-ness” is central in their lives and identity (Honeycutt, 1999). This is an important message to share with extended family members, as discord with in-laws can play a negative and powerful role in marital stability over time (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). Spouses can show their loyalty to each other and in front of others by keeping promises and confidences, not speaking poorly of their partner, and keeping the intimate details of their relationship to themselves. Other potentially disruptive influences might include infidelity, addiction, or workaholicism. Spouses and relationship partners seek to know that their partner values the couple relationship as a priority over such potential disruptions, and emphasize that such commitment to a spouse is strongly related to their satisfaction in the relationship (Clements & Swensen, 2000). This aspect of a relationship must be balanced to avoid draining time away from the couple relationship. For example, one must be careful not to become overly involved with a co-worker’s problems or limit time spent in individual hobbies.

Cultural Considerations

- Participating in couple-only activities may not be highly valued in all cultures. For example, Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh (2009) found that Latino couples with strong marriages preferred to spend time with the entire family instead of spending time alone as a couple. In fact, the family relationships were considered more important than the couple relationships.
- Friendship also assumes that the relationship between partners is equal. That is not true of couple relationships in all cultures. For example, some couple relationships are not equal in power and often the man has more power than the woman. When that is the case, then time together may be less about friendship, and more about accomplishing tasks.

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

Nurture Positive Interactions as Partners

Couples who develop patterns of positive engagement with each other over time benefit from more closeness, greater trust, and resiliency in times of relationship difficulties (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). This aspect illustrates the application of constructs previously discussed in other dimensions, such as *Choose* (e.g., demonstrating commitment; focusing on strengths) and *Care* (e.g., taking a positive orientation). Both partners in a relationship commit to establishing continual patterns of positive interactions and developing supportive exchanges of affection and intimacy. Cycles of negative interaction can dramatically harm a couple relationship while couples who establish continuing patterns of positive interaction tend to be much more happy and stable in their relationships (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Recommended practices focus on developing positive and reciprocal exchanges of love with one’s partner.

Talk With Each Other and Learn to Communicate in Supportive Ways

Good, supportive communication is often the lifeblood of a meaningful and close relationship. Communication itself is central to our interactions with others. Research has long suggested that quality communication matters in marriage, particularly for women (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Thomas, 1990). Research also suggests that it is not how much talking

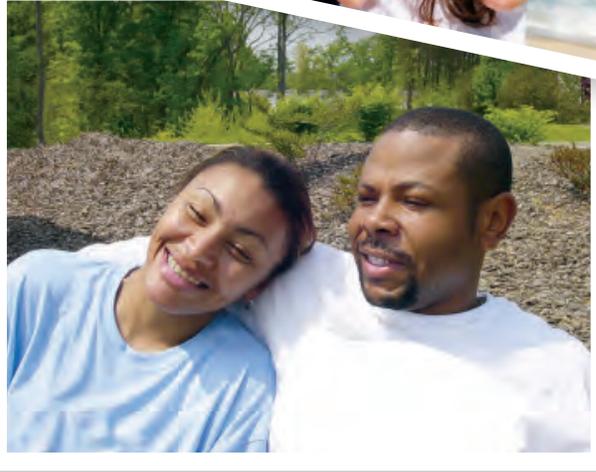
occurs that strengthens a couple friendship, but rather if each person is satisfied with his/her own and his/her partner's level of communication (Erickson, 1993; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Additionally, it is critical that a partner feels listened to and understood (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1997). Real, genuine communication makes it possible for a partner to feel cared for and listened to and assures them that their thoughts and ideas have been clearly understood.

- *Non-verbal communication is as important as what is said.* Communication is the process or way we transfer information and feelings between each other so that it is received and understood. A smile, a hug, a kind word, an angry stare, a wink across the room, a warm tone – all of these actions combine with our words to either build up or tear down a relationship. It is important that each partner is careful about how they communicate information and feelings to each other. Non-verbal communication refers to messages sent and received through non-verbal means such as gestures, touch, body posture, facial expressions, or eye contact. Research with couples suggests that most information about a relationship “is contained in the nonverbal behavior that accompanies verbal messages” and the success of spousal efforts to negotiate issues in the relationship “depends on the spouses’ accuracy in decoding each other’s nonverbal communication” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 35). In essence, spouses who are able to accurately understand the message a partner is communicating when using nonverbal skills and also how a partner will perceive a message tend to have higher levels of marital satisfaction (Burlison & Denton, 1997). A spouse can increase the effectiveness of communication by clearly linking verbal and nonverbal messages, such as saying “I love you” and also smiling at a partner and squeezing his or her arm affectionately at the same time.
- *Filters can affect the way we communicate.* Having a bad day, feeling hungry or tired, or just being frustrated can cause an individual to take any type of communication the wrong way. In other words, an individual’s current mental and emotional state can create a negative filter, which distorts the way we send or receive messages. A person’s positive mood can also act as such a filter (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Each partner should be careful how their mood affects how they send and receive communication. For example, if a spouse had a busy day at work and skipped lunch and is both hungry and irritable upon arriving home,

he might ask to postpone communication about kids’ homework until after a meal and some brief down time. Also, communicating about feelings and moods can let each partner know how their messages may be received. A spouse might say, “Hey, I just finished a really frustrating phone call with my sister. I might listen better if you want to discuss finances if we can wait for an hour or two until I calm down a bit.”

- *Share helpful messages.* Supportive communication also includes being an active listener and only giving helpful messages and abstaining from unhelpful messages. An unhelpful message may include giving advice, sharing personal experiences, shutting down the partner’s feelings, or correcting the person’s account. In contrast, helpful messages include acknowledging the partner’s feelings and pain and inviting more discussion. Research with couples indicates that social support is a powerful factor in helping spouses to deal with times of distress and maintain marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Helpful messages that convey empathy and support can include careful listening, affirming a person’s feelings, showing affection, and being responsive to requests for assistance (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004).





Cultivate and Express Appreciation for Each Other in the Relationship

William James, the father of modern psychology, once stated that “the deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated” (James, 1900). In a couple’s friendship, trust is established and maintained as partners feel respect and appreciation. Research suggests two simple but powerful ways to cultivate and express appreciation between partners in a couple relationship: (1) look for and see positive qualities in a companion, then express and remember them, and (2) seek to maintain a positive view of one’s partner when challenges occur. Psychologist John Gottman calls this “nurturing the fondness and admiration system” couples have for each other (2004, p. 61). How individuals think about their partner can dramatically affect how they feel about their partner – so think positive. These attitudes and behaviors are reinforced in the dimensions of *Choose* and *Care*. Importantly, and specific to the principle of *Share*, expressing positive thoughts and feelings with each other strengthens the couple friendship (Gottman, 2004). Examples of this practice might include always acknowledging a gift from a partner or discussing positive ways that each partner enriches the relationship.

Develop Positive and Mutual Exchanges of Love and Affection

The formation of a trusting companionship rests largely upon a couple’s ability to share positive exchanges of love and establish a high degree of mutual trust with each other. While individual partners in the relationship have the responsibility of fostering positivity (see *Care*), the partners together must reciprocate positive exchanges. The balance between positive and negative exchanges in couple relationships has been called the “magic ratio.” Research suggests that it is the balance between positive moments of support or

Working with Youth

- Adolescents can be helped to build skills toward healthy sharing in romantic relationships through what they learn in their family relationships and friendships. They also can be taught and shown that healthy romantic relationships have at their core a friendship between the partners (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006).
- Provide opportunities for youth to discover their values and interests. Having clarity about one's values and interests increases the likelihood of meeting and forming relationships with others who share similar values and interests. Shared values and interests offer a strong foundation for a solid friendship.
- Focus on the development of interpersonal competence. Effective sharing of one's views and feelings are facilitated with interpersonal skills. Adolescents vary in their interpersonal competence (Paulk, Pittman, Kerpelman, & Adler-Baeder, 2011). Interpersonal competence is comprised of skills (e.g., listening, clear communication, effective conflict management) that can be taught.
- Sometimes adolescents may feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings with another person or they may lack the capacity to detect when they are sharing too much about themselves too quickly. It is important to teach adolescents about appropriate levels of self-disclosure. Based on how well another person is known, and the trust that has been developed in the relationship, the amount of self-disclosure in which the adolescent should engage varies (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008).
- Encourage youth to choose friends and dating partners who facilitate their feeling good about themselves. Sharing positive experiences together, and supporting each other when challenges arise are how relationships help sustain an individual's emotional health. In contrast, when friends and dating partners engage in actions that diminish one's self-esteem and capacity to cope, such relationships are detrimental to the health of the individual.
- Youth need opportunities to practice skills for building and maintaining friendships. This is particularly important for youth who have problems establishing and sustaining healthy close relationships.



affection and negative moments of callousness in relationships that highly predict a relationship's success. In stable marriages and relationships, there tend to be four or five positive exchanges for every negative interaction, thus filling the relationship with positive feelings and energy (Gottman, 1994). Dr. John Gottman has noted, "Your marriage [or relationship] needs much more positivity than negativity to nourish your love. Without it, your relationship is in danger of withering and dying . . . positivity acts as a nutrient, nurturing the affection and joy that are crucial if your love is to weather the rough spots" (Gottman, 1994, p. 58). A spouse can take individual action to generate positive interactions by intentionally doing something positive for a partner, but also by being attentive to and responding with support or love when a partner reaches out in a small way for connection. This behavior is commonly referred to as making a "bid for connection" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Facilitating positive and mutual exchanges with a partner can range from verbal expressions of love to acts of service or acceptance of a habit that bothers you. Specific examples of this may include remembering to say "I love you" and briefly connecting with a partner before leaving the home or exchanging simple notes of appreciation once a week.

Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University



Conclusion

Research shows that couples who establish loving interactions and work to maintain those efforts rather than drifting into ambivalence do much better over time in their relationships (Huston, Coughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Thus, it is what a couple *shares* – of themselves, with each other, and together – that largely defines the quality and value of their relationship as a couple. Indeed, a wealth of research studies demonstrate that a consistent effort by both spouses over time to show affection, focus on positive interactions, and be open and supportive very strongly predicts both marital satisfaction and quality (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Huston, Coughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000; Szinovacz, 1996). A stable and lasting friendship is central to how most couples define what kind of relationship they want and why the relationship is valued. Friendship is not simply about love for each other, but about liking and trusting each other (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). Rather than living “alone together” (Amato et al., 2007), couples can share the richness of a deep and loving relationship as they develop a close friendship, nurture positive interactions with each other, build a meaningful sense of couple identity, and spend meaningful time in each other’s presence.

Implications for Practice



- Motivate couples to find opportunities to spend meaningful time together on a daily basis through continued courtship and shared couple activities.
- Have each partner list 10 activities or interests that he or she finds most meaningful and enjoyable. If couples need help, brainstorm with them or provide them with a list of potential activities, interests, and hobbies they can participate in together. Ask partners to share their lists with each other and encourage them to support each other’s involvement in some of the pursuits.
- Foster a shared sense of couple identity by asking couples to list and discuss routines and rituals that give meaning to them as a couple and family.
- Facilitate opportunities for couples to engage in common purposes that are meaningful to them, such as service opportunities or expressions of their lives together.
- Ask couples to define the boundaries for their relationship. What behaviors will they limit in their interactions with each other? What are boundaries they feel would benefit their relationship and commitment to each other?
- Educate couples about healthy and constructive communication patterns versus unhealthy and negative communication patterns. Help them understand the importance of sending clear (not mixed messages) through their verbal and non-verbal communication. Have couples practice sharing helpful responses and using active listening skills.



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Manage

Dealing With Differences in Healthy Ways

James Marshall, University of Arkansas
Anthony Santiago, Iowa State University
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University
Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia

What *Manage* Looks Like

- Understanding there cannot always be agreement
- Using soft start-ups: share concerns in a calm, respectful tone
- Avoiding criticism and defensiveness
- Listening and accepting influence
- Stopping conflict before it escalates
- Taking “time outs” but coming back to talk
- Soothing and supporting each other
- Being open to forgiveness
- Maintaining emotional and physical safety

Introduction

Managing the differences that arise in a relationship, as well as the negative emotions that can result, are keys to a strong partnership (Steuber, 2005). Problems and conflicts are a normal part of couple relationships. No couple agrees on everything; individuals often bring very different backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and habits into relationships. In addition, most couples face stressors, individually and as a family, which can create a context within which conflict arises. Partners will have to deal with many stressors and differences, large and small, in their relationship. Importantly, research shows that the majority of problems in long-term, healthy couple relationships are never completely *resolved*; couples simply work to *manage* them (Gottman, 1998).

This chapter provides an overview of what we know about how to prevent and manage conflicts well (while maintaining safety) in order to create and maintain stable, healthy couple relationships. *Manage* focuses on partners' use of strategies to stay calm, contain their stress response, soothe their partner, listen attentively, make an effort to understand their partner's point of view, accept differences, and forgive one another. Efforts to build skills in this area of couple functioning will result in a couple's ability to manage stressors and differences effectively (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Wiley, 2007).

Conflict in the Relationship

Disagreements and conflicts are a natural and normal part of all relationships. However, thoughts and behaviors that are negative in character can erode a positive environment and lead to relationship dissatisfaction and instability. Several key negative behaviors and thought patterns have been identified in research that lead to marital dissolution. Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling are red flags in couple communication and conflict management (Gottman, 1996; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).



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- *Criticism* involves attacking a partner's personality or character with accusations and blame. It is important to distinguish between criticizing and making a specific request or complaint. Specific requests can be helpful if they address a key issue in a non-critical way. A partner is much more likely to respond favorably to a specific request or non-blaming complaint than to criticism (Gottman & Silver, 1999).
- *Defensiveness* involves protecting one's self from a perceived threat (i.e., a partner's criticism) and refusing to take responsibility for personal actions. When someone feels criticized or attacked, it is natural to feel defensive (Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). However, defensiveness blocks a couple's ability to deal with an issue effectively because a defensive person is not open to suggestions and is not focused on the other person's perspective.
- *Contempt* is a highly toxic and destructive communication pattern that develops over time as couples use more criticism and defensiveness. Contempt is a very negative view of the partner and may involve the use of intentional insults, name-calling, mocking, and rude or dismissive gestures.
- *Stonewalling* involves withdrawing from one's partner physically and/or emotionally and refusing to communicate. This is different than "conflict avoidance" (Roberts, 2000) or "time-outs" (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002), which are proactive strategies that can be helpful when emotions and reactions are intense (see next section). With stonewalling, a partner makes a habit of checking out and does not re-engage with their partner to try to manage or soothe the situation.

When couples engage in these destructive patterns of communication, their relationship becomes fragile. Research shows that these four negative interactional patterns tend to occur in sequence: use of criticism is met with defensiveness; this pattern over time leads to the use of contemptuous attitudes and behaviors by one or both partners; eventually one or both partners begin stonewalling and shutting out the other (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Research shows that either the man or the woman may initiate the sequence of attacking and defending, depending upon who is seeking change (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Crohan, 1996; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). When individuals feel offended or want their partner to change, they are more likely to use verbal attacks. However, a verbal attack typically does not result in a desired change. Instead it tends to ignite a downward spiral of negative interaction that leads to emotional and physical disengagement. Raising awareness of these patterns can be helpful to couples.



Why *Manage Matters to Parenting and Children*

- Children who see parents engage in conflict or violence may be more likely to exhibit similar behaviors.
- Children need to be exposed to adults who can successfully manage conflict so that they learn how to do so with friends, family members, and in future romantic relationships.
- Parents can also learn how to speak more "softly" toward their children, as well as romantic partners. Getting in the habit of using gentle or soft startups with all family members can promote a more respectful, positive family environment – one in which children feel comfortable and safe to express their needs and share their thoughts and beliefs.

Managing Negative Emotions During Conflict

Unmanaged negative emotions can undermine effective and healthy patterns of couple communication and can lead to poor relationship quality and relationship break-up (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). In addition, parents' poor management of stress and emotions in the couple relationship can create an unhealthy environment for children (El Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1994). Research indicates that the ability to self-regulate emotions and self-calm is developed over time, and that these abilities are the result of both innate tendencies (i.e., what we "came with") and environmental influences (i.e., our family members, peers) (El Sheikh et al., 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1997). Although general patterns of emotion regulation are stable over time, there also is evidence that people can change their patterns of managing stress and emotions (Fetsch, Schultz, & Wahler, 1999; Gross, 2001;

Keiley, 2002). This means it is possible to learn to better regulate emotions and respond to stress and conflict in helpful and healthy ways. Strategies include recognizing negative emotional arousal triggers and symptoms, stopping escalation, using soothing behaviors and repair attempts, and maintaining positive thinking strategies.

Recognize Signs of Negative Emotional Arousal

A real or perceived threat, such as a criticism, initiates a reaction in the body that limits one's capacity to listen, talk, and handle conflict in a healthy way (Nichols, 2009). When individuals focus on their angry feelings, they often get angrier (Williams & Williams, 1998). This can lead to a phenomenon that Gottman and Silver (1999) refer to as *flooding* – feeling overwhelmed both emotionally and physically. Feeling flooded can lead to aggressive actions. Research provides evidence of physiological differences in men's and women's responses to couple conflict. Men are more easily overwhelmed by conflict than their wives (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When men feel emotionally overwhelmed they tend to withdraw and disengage. If they are not able to re-engage and work through the situation, this is unhealthy for the relationship (Stanley et al., 2002).

Educators can help couples develop an awareness of the stress response and its effects on each partner and the relationship. Understanding the physiology involved in emotional arousal can help couples enhance their strategies for managing its effects. It can also be valuable for individuals to assess family history and its influence on their patterns of emotional arousal and emotion-regulation. Raising awareness of the processes involved in emotion regulation can lead to learning and applying both cognitive (thinking) and behavioral strategies for enhancing an individual's ability to manage stress and to regulate negative emotional arousal in ways that are healthy for the individual and the relationship.

Use Emotion-Regulation Strategies

Partners can assist each other when negative emotional arousal occurs. Soothing strategies – both in thinking and in behaviors – are used by couples in healthy relationships (e.g., Gottman & Silver, 1999). The way partners respond to each other in the face of stress and negative emotions influences situation outcomes. Some responses make the situation worse by increasing negative feelings. In contrast, positive reactions to conflict or stress can have calming effects on the other person (Acitelli, 1997; Rowan, Compton, & Rust, 1995). Some examples include:

- *Establishing clear rules of engagement.* Harmful patterns of interaction can be avoided by establishing rules for conflict in the relationship. For example, a couple might agree that name calling, insults, and

raised voices are unacceptable ways for them to deal with conflict. Instead, they might agree to give their full attention to one another, listen to the emotions and needs that are being expressed, and understand the issue from the other person's point of view. They might also agree to take a "time out" and come back to an issue later if tensions are escalating, or they might even agree to disagree.

- *Employing repair attempts to deal with conflict.* A repair attempt is any statement or action that prevents negativity from escalating out of control (Gottman & Silver, 1999). It is an effort to soothe one's partner (i.e., speaking in a soft voice, smiling, using appropriate humor, using non-defensive listening, giving the partner a hug, or apologizing) to help him or her calm down.
- *Taking a "time out."* When used to calm a situation, a time out can also be effective (Stanley et al., 2002). This is different than the emotional disengagement of stonewalling. Time-outs are a positive strategy when they are agreed upon by the couple because they allow each individual the opportunity to calm down before re-engaging later to work through a difference or challenge.

Importantly, how conflict begins generally predicts the path it will take. A key strategy in managing conflict is the use of soft startups. A soft startup involves talking about a difference of opinion or an issue in a way that is sensitive to the partner's perspective (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Soft startups are free from criticism, blame, and contempt. When a soft startup is used, the other person generally does not feel as defensive, and the likelihood of a productive discussion is far greater. For example, it is not as effective to say, "You never have time for us anymore. You are too self-absorbed" as it is to say, "I am lonely when we don't make time to do things together."



Build Up the Positive Emotional Bank

For happy, stable couples it is not a lack of conflict that is the goal. Instead, couples should strive to create a positive, supportive environment and develop habits of interaction that show respect for each other and the relationship. As mentioned in *Care and Share*, research on couples shows that in healthy, stable relationships there are typically five positives for each negative (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; 2002). That is, a partner in a healthy relationship will express love, appreciation, and affection an average of five times for each correction or complaint that he or she offers. When there is a preponderance of positive interactions in a relationship, an occasional cross word or misunderstanding will not be as damaging to the relationship as when positive behaviors and interactions are rare. Observations of couples who maintain high levels of positivity show that disagreements are naturally handled more easily and more respectfully (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). This has been termed “positive sentiment override” (Gottman, 1998). These actions are further addressed in *Care and Share*.

Maintain Positive Thinking Strategies

In addition to behaving positively toward each other, individuals in healthy relationships also think positively about each other. This includes making positive attributions, or making a conscious effort to give one’s partner the “benefit of the doubt” (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Most individuals are keenly aware of their own wants, needs, hopes, dreams, fears, and desires, but often fail to understand these things from their partner’s point of view. A positive view of a partner would include assuming that the partner is probably doing what they feel is right for the relationship based on his or her understanding of things (Christensen & Jacobsen, 2000). A positive view also includes



using positive mental explanations for a partner’s choices and behaviors (i.e., giving the benefit of the doubt). Making a habit of thinking about why a partner is loved and valued helps maintain an overall positive relational climate. Couples who put a positive spin on their relationship history and interpret present events in a positive light are likely to have a happy future as well (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Adopting a Willingness to Accept Influence

The willingness to accept influence from a partner without resentment or negativity is a key to enhancing conflict management skills. Research indicates that men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages and are less likely to divorce than men who resist their wives’ influence (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This finding has been misinterpreted as a prescription for men to give up on making decisions in relationships and allow their wives to rule their lives. However, accepting influence is not about giving in reluctantly, but rather, involves resisting a defensive response and really listening to one’s partner with respect, sharing power and practicing co-decision-making. Thus, when happy couples disagree, husbands actively search for common ground and work to understand their wife’s perspective, rather than insisting on getting their way. Reciprocally, wives of men who accept their influence are far less likely to be harsh with their husbands when bringing up and discussing difficult issues (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

This process involves the use of empathy – the willingness to see another’s view. Successful management of conflict includes accurately assessing the other person’s experience in the relationship and in the discussion (Acitelli et al., 2001; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Shapiro et al., 2004). Empathy is both a cognitive and an emotional process that is reflected in how one responds to the other (Duan & Hill, 1996). Empathy creates a dual advantage in that it can enhance one’s ability to manage emotional arousal as well as reduce feelings of disengagement and desire to fight (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Therefore, it is not surprising that accepting influence and using empathy go hand-in-hand.

This interactional style creates an environment within which team decision-making can occur. A couple’s willingness and ability to make decisions together contributes to greater marital satisfaction (Tesser, 1988) and relationship stability (Kirchler, Rodler, Holzl, & Meier, 2001). Team oriented decision-making does not necessarily mean that all decisions are shared equally. It does, however, provide both partners with clear areas of leadership and control within the relationship (Beach, Whitaker, O’Mahen, Jones, Tesser, & Fincham, 2002). When partners have well-

developed decision-making strategies, they are better able to recognize individual strengths and defer to each other according to their strengths, thereby promoting collaboration and team work (Beach et al., 2002). When partners make decisions based on each other's strengths, it helps them regulate their competitive behaviors, support each other, and enhance their relationship (Tesser, 1988). Partners who have difficulty making decisions together tend to be more competitive with one another, which can lead to a win-lose way of thinking (Beach et al., 2002).

Cultural Considerations

- *A willingness to accept influence and work together may not fit culturally with some religious beliefs.* Many religious groups promote traditional roles for husbands and wives, with the husband making most decisions regarding couple and family life. For example, Muslims in many countries appear to be concerned with approval of others and family issues. They are more concerned with the needs of the collective group rather than the individual or the couple relationship (Dwairy, 2009; Triandis, 1995). The social system in the Muslim world tends to be authoritarian with the family responding to a patriarchal hierarchy of authority. Couple communication is not about sharing feelings, but is directed by respect, fulfilling social duties, and avoiding conflict. A husband accepting the wife's influence or the couple working as a team in decision-making would not be part of a traditional Muslim marriage relationship.
- *Communication may be more non-verbal than verbal for couples in some cultures.* Some cultures rely heavily on non-verbal or high-context communication. For example, Asian Americans often make efforts to avoid shame or loss of face. Therefore, they may not verbally say what they mean. The listener will need to rely on the context of what is said to understand meaning. This type of communication avoids loss of face for both individuals. Therefore, interactive strategies for couples from some ethnic groups may be more complex and rely less on verbal communication than non-verbal communication patterns (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University



Accepting Differences and Using Forgiveness

Research indicates that people with many common characteristics are attracted to one another (Amodio & Showers, 2005). However, all couples, no matter how many similarities they share, will have some differences of opinion, taste, and belief. Scholars note that individuals in healthy relationships develop a basic acceptance or tolerance of their partner's personality and preferences (Gottman, 1998). As noted, research indicates that an expectation for resolving all differences in couple relationships is unrealistic; as very few differences are truly *resolved* (Gottman, 1998). Accepting a partner the way s/he is and adjusting expectations are two of the best ways to manage conflict. Doing so may allow a person the space to change. Accepting a partner and supporting each other's growth and change contribute to a satisfying relationship.

The following story from *Reader's Digest* (McFarlane, 1992) illustrates the value of accepting differences in a relationship:

On her golden wedding anniversary, my grandmother revealed the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day, I decided to choose ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook," she explained. A guest asked her to name some of the faults. "To tell the truth," she replied, "I never did get around to listing them. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten.'" (p. 104).

Researchers and clinicians find that forgiveness is essential to a successful couple relationship (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009). Many faulty beliefs exist surrounding forgiveness, which often hinder its application in

relationships. For instance, forgiveness is often wrongly understood as requiring a person to deny or forget about a transgression, accept or excuse an offense, or it may open the door for the person to hurt them again (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Forgiveness does not require reconciliation, though it makes reconciliation more likely (Hall & Fincham, 2006). In addition, forgiving an individual is often not an instantaneous act but something that occurs over time.

Forgiveness “is the idea of a change whereby one becomes less motivated to think, feel, and behave negatively (e.g., retaliate, withdraw) in regard to the offender” (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; p. 416). As discussed in *Choose*, a person can intentionally make the choice to forgive another person in order to strengthen the relationship. Couples who exhibit less forgiveness have been found to have more ineffective conflict resolution, producing long-standing disagreements that facilitate more conflict in the future. Therefore, this act is a critical part of managing relationship challenges, large and small, much like apologizing and making a repair attempt. Use of forgiveness in relationships is linked with greater relationship satisfaction, more benign attributions, and stronger commitment to a relationship (see Fincham et al., 2006 for review).



Working with Youth

- Many adolescents are still learning how to manage their emotions, particularly strong negative emotions. Helping adolescents learn anger management skills and self-soothing techniques is important for preparing them to handle the dynamics of conflict within intimate and other (e.g., parent, teacher, and peer) relationships.
- Help adolescents understand that conflict is a normal part of healthy romantic relationships. Learning ways to handle conflict effectively so that the relationship is strengthened and grows is the key to long lasting successful relationships. In some cases, however, having conflicts, especially frequent conflicts, may be a sign that they should end a relationship that is not a good fit for them.
- Adolescents also need opportunities to practice negotiation skills. Some adolescents struggle with being assertive in their friendships and dating relationships because they fear losing the friend or dating partner. Other adolescents confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness. Helping adolescents learn and practice appropriate assertiveness skills is important. Adolescents need to experience what it is like to stand up for themselves effectively, while still maintaining respect for the other person (and for themselves). Role plays that emphasize the difference between aggressiveness, assertiveness, and non assertiveness in relationships help adolescents understand the differences and the consequences of these different approaches to dealing with interpersonal conflict.
- Not all adolescents have a well-developed sense of empathy, but like other areas of interpersonal competence, empathy can be developed. Empathy is an important part of working out disagreements with others. Helping adolescents take the perspective of another individual and to consider that individual’s feelings facilitate the development of empathy.
- Youth also need to understand the importance of not subordinating their own needs for those of others. Although the subordination of one’s own needs for the needs of one’s partner may occur in mature, long term relationships, in a give and take fashion, it is not healthy to subordinate one’s own needs as a way to win friendship or approval. In adolescent or less mature relationships, such behavior typically does not engender true caring from others, but rather communicates to others that the youth can be taken advantage of and is not to be respected. It also should be pointed out that when one always gives in to the demands of others, this can lead one to feel unhappy, uncared for, and depressed.
- Normalize the role of conflict in relationships and how to manage conflict in ways that help healthy relationships grow. Also note the warning signs that indicate a relationship is not healthy or functional and what to do. Emphasize attention to signs indicating whether one is being respected within a relationship. If one or both partners do not respect each other, and mistreat one another, their relationship is not a healthy one.

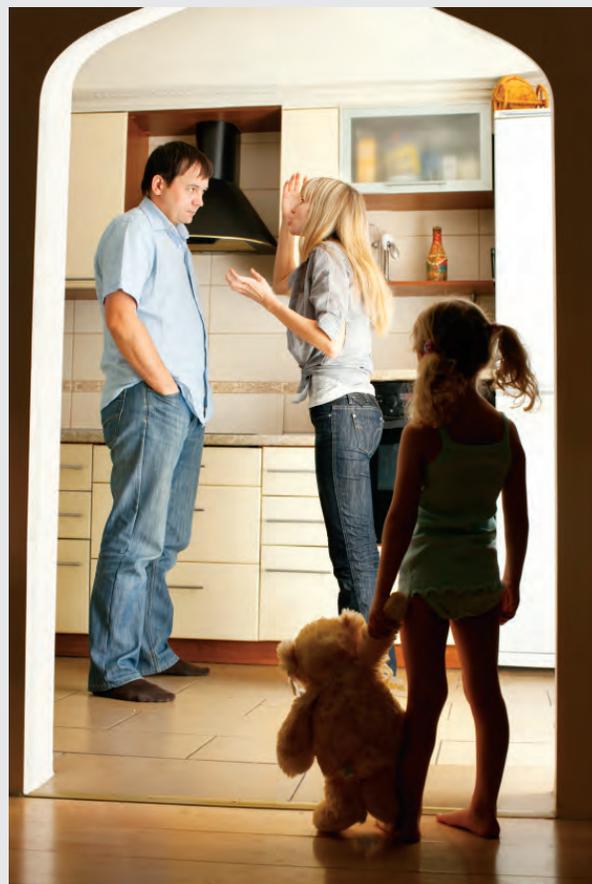
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Maintaining Emotional and Physical Safety

Personal safety is defined as the absence of fear of physical or emotional violence within the relationship (Stanley, 2004). Importantly, research highlights characteristics of distinct types of unsafe and violent couple relationships (Johnson, 2008). The term “domestic violence” is often used to describe several different situations.

- **Intimate Violence:** One partner is violent and controlling on multiple levels, including intimidation, coercion and threats, economic abuse, isolation, and emotional abuse. (Johnson, 2008).
- **Violent Resistance:** One partner is violent and controlling while the other partner is violent but not controlling. This often happens when one partner fights back against the violence. (Johnson, 2008).
- **Situational Violence:** The individual is violent but neither partner is violent and controlling. The violence is provoked by a specific situation, such as during mismanaged couple conflict and emotional arousal. Although the violence is not consistent, it can be dangerous (Johnson, 2008). Situational couple violence has been viewed as an interactional process that is often reciprocal in nature. Reciprocity is seen in the escalation of negative behaviors from one partner toward the other in intimate relationships (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

Safety in expressing emotion refers to individuals' ability to freely express their emotions without fear. In many relationships it is safe for individuals to openly express their emotions without fear of retaliation or harm from their partner. However, in some relationships this is not the case. Research suggests that the expression of certain emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, resentment) can aggravate emotional tension, and thus increase the risk of aggression in a relationship (Marcus & Swett, 2002). In contrast, researchers have found that the expression of empathy and intimacy serve as two protective factors that soothe emotional tension and contribute to the creation and maintenance of safe relationships (Marcus & Swett, 2002). Importantly, this does not apply to couples experiencing intimate violence (for more information, see Johnson, 2008). It is important that marriage and relationship educators understand the signs of intimate partner violence and have response plans in place when working with couples where safety may be a concern (Ooms et al., 2006).



Domestic Violence Resources

- Building Collaborations Between Healthy Marriage & Relationship Education and Domestic Violence Programs. <http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVHealthyMarriage.php>
- Center for Family Policy and Practice. <http://www.cffpp.org/pubdomviol.html>
- Family Violence Prevention: A Toolkit for Stakeholders. <http://tinyurl.com/fvp-toolkit-p>
- Family Violence Prevention and Services Program. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/programs/family-violence-prevention-services>
- Making Distinctions Among Different Types of Intimate Partner Violence. <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=403>
- Promoting Safety: A Resource Packet for Marriage and Relationship Educators and Program Administrators. <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=82>
- The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. <http://www.nrcdv.org>



Conclusion

Conflict is a part of every relationship, even healthy ones. It is how the couple manages the conflict that is related to couple satisfaction and stability. By managing negative emotions, soothing physiological responses, having a predominance of positivity in the relationship, accepting differences, using forgiveness, adopting a willingness to accept influence, empathizing, and working together, couples can be successful in conflict management. By focusing on these skills, as well as family safety, educators can assist couples in managing conflict in a safe, healthy way.

Implications for Practice



- In order to cultivate a willingness and ability to manage conflict and differences in couple relationships, it is helpful for educators to model and practice constructive conflict management approaches with program participants.
- Normalizing the continued existence of conflict in healthy couple relationships is an important awareness-raising element for programs. Raise awareness of key differences in habits, expectations, views, and beliefs, particularly for newly formed couples and offer strategies to discuss these differences.
- Promote the use of soft engagement and interaction strategies. Prevention of high negative emotional arousal includes using soft startups and perspective-taking. Explain what happens in the body when a person is put on the defensive and is emotionally aroused. Describe and offer opportunities to role play and practice relational skills, both behavioral and cognitive, that engage partners in initiating conversations that do not put the other on the defensive.
- Raise awareness of the signs of intimate partner violence and strategies for promoting safety.
- Clarify the value of forgiveness in relationships. Discussing what forgiveness is and how an individual can offer forgiveness is an important skill to teach to individuals and couples served. Encouraging a couple to practice asking for and giving forgiveness when conflict arises is important for managing conflict.
- Encourage the use of accepting influence and enhancement of empathy skills. Perspective-taking is a key element in a person's ability to accept the influence of another. When partners actively acknowledge and value each other's view, it strengthens their ability to manage stressors and conflict in their relationship.
- Address the value of a team approach to decision-making. Individuals in healthy couples express their value for each other by promoting "we-ness" when in conflict (see *Share*), rather than using a win-lose approach. Teach conflict management strategies that reinforce understanding and teamwork.



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Connect

Engaging in a Positive Social Network of Support

Sean Brotherson, North Dakota State University
Andrew Behnke, North Carolina State University
Wally Goddard, University of Arkansas

What *Connect* Looks Like

- Growing and maintaining extended family relationships
- Being part of a supportive network of friends
- Seeking out resources to strengthen your relationship
- Identifying and celebrating sources of meaning
- Engaging jointly in community organizations and service

Introduction

Couples and couples live and love within the context of a larger community of relationships. These *connections*, whether represented in the support of caring in-laws or the engagement of a couple in a faith community, aid in supporting and sustaining a couple's relationship over time. It is within the context of a community of meaningful relationships that couples learn what they value, how to pursue meaning for themselves as a couple, and offer service to others. Strong relationships with others can act as knots in a larger "safety net" that provides security for the couple unit (Beach, Fincham, Katz, & Bradbury, 1996).

Couples who face challenges typically do better if they turn to the meaningful connections in their lives for support, solace, or perspective in managing their concerns (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rodgers, 2007; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). This reality speaks to a powerful truth about human beings – we need others and they need us (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging, meaning, and support all flow to a degree through the *connections* that we develop and share with others. During a period of flooding in the Midwestern United States, many couples faced economic difficulty, stress, and potentially the loss of their homes. They needed help. What happened? They reached out to connect with family, relatives, and friends in their time of need. Many of them took time for spiritual activities that helped them feel



strength from a source outside of themselves. Further, many of them extended themselves and worked hard to provide supplies, labor, and a hug of support to others within their communities. Such is the power of connections.

The connections we forge in life, as individuals and couples, can become a web of meaning and support that gives strength to us and also to others. This can lead to a variety of practical benefits for couples. Meaningful social connections can provide a *support system* for couples when they encounter challenges such as loss of a job or diagnosis of a serious health issue. Being connected with sources of meaning beyond themselves can furnish couples with a *source of perspective* as they look for happiness or cope with difficulties. Linkages to others in the community can open up a *network of opportunities* to give volunteer service or contribute to a worthy cause. Research on marriage and couple relationships suggests that, in addition to the social support partners receive from each other (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000), varying connections with others are highly influential in the health and vitality of those relationships (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Smith, 2010).

Engaging Social Support Systems

Research over the last decade has pointed to the importance of connecting with others as an element of healthy couple relationships (Doherty & Carroll, 2002). Studies have shown that not only individuals, but similarly couples, benefit from social connections (e.g., Hansen, Fallon, & Novotny, 1991; Kearns & Leonard, 2004). More isolated couples tend to have less satisfying and more troubled marriages compared to those with supportive networks of kinship and friends (Amato et al., 2007). Greater levels of social integration have also been linked to improved health behaviors in both husbands and wives (Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, Matthews, & Elder, 1997). Overall, “social networks” appear as one of the five previously-identified core maintenance strategies that promote relationship resilience (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Social support often improves economic, physical, and emotional well-being by offering couples resources that would otherwise not be available to them. Participating in supportive friendship relationships as a couple has positive influences on the couple relationship (Beach et al., 1996), and such friendships can create outlets for positive recreation and improved psychological and emotional well-being (Cohen & Hoberman, 2006; Sullivan et al., 1998). Spouses or partners who perceive meaningful social support from their companions or others are less likely to show symptoms of depression or anxiety, feel more able to control stress in their lives, and express greater individual and relationship satisfaction (Cohen & Hoberman, 2006; Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001; Lawrence et al., 2008).



Why *Connect* Matters to Parenting and Children

- Parents who make a point to connect with other friends, family members, and people in the community are exposing those same connections to their children. When friends/family notice that a parent is struggling, they can step in and provide support to both the parent and children. Children may feel (and be) safer knowing that they have other adults to turn to in times of need.
- Getting families involved with the greater community also offers children opportunities to independently engage in activities outside of the home. These activities can provide children with opportunities beyond family life to build supportive relationships, get away from stresses, and care for others.

Though such research has pointed to multiple ways in which connecting with others can help relationships, it is important to note that couples need not try to connect in every way discussed below. Some of the specific recommended practices may feel more comfortable than others for different couples. We suggest that couples engage in those types of social connections that are meaningful for them.

Draw Support From a Community Network

Developing and maintaining healthy couple relationships is bolstered by social support and meaningful social engagement with others. Couples who experience greater social support experience higher quality and more stable marriages (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Just as it has been suggested that “no man is an island,” it is also true that no couple is apart from a community. Ideally, couples belong to a community of support “where every marriage flourishes

and where every couple is a giver and receiver of support” (Doherty & Carroll, 2002, p. 582). Building meaningful and supportive connections with friends can enable couples to avoid social isolation, reduce stress, and experience positive interactions with others. For instance, spouses who are more socially integrated as a couple report higher levels of marital satisfaction and protect against declines in satisfaction due to greater financial distress or residing in more urban areas (Barton, 2013). In recent decades, couples tend to have fewer and fewer close friendship connections, in part due to the influence of media (e.g., time spent on the Internet, watching TV, etc.) and the demands of work (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Therefore, it may be important for couples to purposefully focus on devoting effort and time to engaging and building social support networks. For example, a struggling young couple might turn to older friends for sound advice on managing money together, or a group of couples might benefit from meeting regularly to discuss enriching marital practices or go on dates together. For couples, creating a web or safety net of support and compassion that can help sustain them through hard times can be vital.

Cultivate Positive Relationships with Extended Family Members

In marriage, it is often said that when marrying the person one also “marries the family.” Relationships with extended family members can have a significant influence on couple relationships. Extended family members have long been shown to influence couple relationships through passing on expectations about gender roles, extending or limiting support for the couple, and contributing to the decisions made by couples (Dehle et al., 2001; Goetting, 1990). As an example, for many Hispanic couples the extended family’s emphasis on “familismo” (i.e., strong emphasis on family and community obligations) means that parents, grandparents, and siblings may directly influence everything from selection of a marital partner to decisions about where a couple lives (Rafaelli & Ontai, 2004). Research indicates that for some couples, extended family member involvement that is perceived by one or both partners as “interference” can negatively affect the couple relationship (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). In contrast, strong, positive

ties with extended family members can be a key source of strength for couples, in particular during times of economic or emotional difficulty (Widmer, 2004). Couples need to discuss their relationships with extended family members and decide together the level of connection they are most comfortable with as a couple. Accepted cultural norms will influence an individual’s receptiveness to the amount and nature of the involvement, such as listening to family members’ suggestions on managing household tasks or making family decisions. Couples can cultivate positive relationships with extended family members through time together at holidays or regular visits, or via telephone or electronic means.

Attend to Meaningful Relationships

In addition, an active awareness of the relationships and social activities that are meaningful to a partner is helpful in sustaining a couple relationship. Researcher John Gottman (1999) has referred to such knowledge as the development of a “love map,” or a “part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner’s life” (p. 48). Research by Gottman and other scholars has shown that spouses who have a more developed awareness of the relationships and social activities important to a partner are more sensitive to a spouse’s needs and more supportive of their involvement in things meaningful to them. For example, a husband who develops this awareness might recognize that his wife benefits and feels reduced stress when she goes out with a few friends regularly, and then he can be more willing to give her support in pursuing such activities. See more information on the benefits of developing intimate knowledge of a partner’s social world in the *Know* chapter.



Become Aware of and Access Formal Community Supports

Sometimes couples experience problems within their relationship that they may feel unable to alleviate on their own. These situations can range from minor communication problems to serious mental health (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation) or abuse situations (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse). Some less extreme situations often can be improved through marriage education opportunities, couple or family counseling, or interactions with support groups (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). In cases of more severe circumstances, like addictions and situations where an individual may potentially do harm to self or others, more intensive supports or interventions are required (e.g., drug counseling, other expert help). Knowledge of and participation in these kinds of support services is often helpful for individual and relational well-being. Whether it is participation in a couples' dinner group or intensive involvement with a counselor, couples who participate in communities or activities supportive of their relationship are more likely to resolve concerns and do well over time.



Cultural Considerations

- *There is a dearth of relationship and marriage enhancement programs and other social services that are culturally appropriate.* It is important for people from diverse cultures and people who have limited resources to find services that are a good fit with their cultural values. Many programs and services are based upon research and information that is relevant for European American and middle-class couples. It is important that individuals and families are supported in maintaining their cultural heritage because relying upon one's cultural heritage, the way one's people deal with struggles, can help people be resilient and handle problems more effectively (Delgado, 1998; Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008).
- *Indigenous healing may be used by some to address problems and distress.* Indigenous healing, or healing that originates within a culture or society, is healing that was used before Western medicine, and is still used by many ethnic groups today. These old forms of wisdom rely on the group to help reconnect a person with family or significant others. Spirituality and religious beliefs are used in healing and the person conducting the healing ceremony is usually an elder or a community leader (Sue & Sue, 2008). These forms of healing or dealing with problems, which involve the mind, body, and spirit may take the form of sacred ceremonies used in American Indian cultures. For example, an American Indian couple may use a sacred ceremony to aid in overcoming a troubled couple relationship. Diverse ethnic groups have a history of using indigenous healing to solve problems.

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Being Connected to Sources of Meaning or Purpose

Individual spouses and couples who see themselves as part of a larger system of meaning tend to feel more positive about their relationships and exhibit greater levels of commitment (Marks, 2005; Sullivan et al., 1998). Sources of meaning for individuals or couples may help to guide their attitudes and actions, provide stability and direction, and give comfort in times of difficulty. Individuals and couples may connect with higher purposes, values, or goals to strengthen themselves and their relationships.

Connect to Sources of Meaning

Individuals and couples often turn to sources of meaning for healing at times of need, such as when a spouse seeks the counsel of religious leaders or other mentors due to marital difficulties or finds comfort in meaningful family traditions. Individuals who connect with sources of meaning often rely upon such sources in making decisions about family life and interacting with a partner. For example, partners who place a high emphasis on the value of commitment may be more willing to overlook a partner's faults or work hard at overcoming relationship concerns (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

In addition, decisions to actively participate in faith or spiritual communities as a couple reflects a common set of beliefs and can provide couples with shared practices and family traditions that enhance their relationship. Many faith groups or spiritual communities also have clergy or social support mechanisms that encourage healthy, lasting relationships (Marks, 2005). Couples who attend religious services together tend to have larger social networks and typically hold more positive perceptions of the quality of those social networks (Ellison & George, 1994).

Pursue Common Purposes, Interests, or Goals

While not all families choose to participate in religious activities, couples can find strength in shared value systems that link them together in how they live as a family or serve in their community (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). The pursuit of common dreams or shared couple goals that result from a shared value system is a vital part of a healthy relationship (Olson & Olson, 2000). Couples magnify the quality of their relationship when they focus on shared goals. Engaging together in pursuit of common purposes or goals helps to provide couples with motivation, direction, and meaning. Examples of this practice might include planning to reach a shared goal, working together in a community group, or keeping a diary together for their children in which they reflect on their family's values.



Reaching Out to Others and Offering Support

The connections with others run in both directions. While individuals and couples can receive support from others, a genuine involvement in meaningful relationships suggests that they also reach out and offer support to others. Helping others seems to increase one's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive affect, sending the message that the individual can indeed make a difference in the lives of those around them (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). This in turn can have a very beneficial influence on the couple relationship. Some scholars assert that if couples focus exclusively on their own relationship without regard for the broader community, both they and the community as a whole are deprived (McPherson et al., 2006). Couples likely benefit as they see themselves as part of a larger community and take steps to contribute to the well-being of others.

Simple Acts of Service Can Become a Source of Significant Strength

For many couples this means reaching out and engaging in their communities through civic groups, neighborhood organizations, and others. During the last three decades, volunteerism literature has noted the positive effects of voluntary service on individuals and couples (Keyes, 2002;

Smith, 2010; Wilson, 2000). People who participate in volunteerism gain new skills and opportunities and build social capital (Morrow-Howell, Kinnevy, & Mann, 1999; Smith, 2010). Service gives an increased sense of personal meaning, self-worth, and control (Luks & Payne, 2001; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Helping others outside of one's close family and peer groups encourages individuals to act less out of self-interest and develop qualities of altruism that in turn may flow into their close personal relationships (Kulik, 2002).

Give Social Support to Other Couples and Peers

Whether simply establishing a friendship with a younger couple or helping a couple in distress, couples themselves are often the best resource for giving social support to other couples. A number of effective couple education programs involve peer-to-peer networking and support from other couples (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). For example, older couples in healthy marriages might serve as mentors to younger couples just entering marriage. As couples work together in providing support or giving of themselves, they may grow closer and deeper in their commitment to one another (Smith, 2010; Stanley et al., 2006). Examples of this practice may include sharing helpful resources on marriage with others, talking with a distressed friend, or helping facilitate a relationship education class.



Working with Youth

- Emphasize the importance of maintaining relationships with family members and friends when in a serious dating relationship. Note that it is important to spend time with family members and friends both with the dating partner and without the dating partner.
- Suggest that listening to the opinions of respected family members and friends might be helpful in assessing whether a dating partner is a good fit, as well as whether a dating relationship should continue or become more serious.
- This is an opportunity to educate adolescents about unhealthy, controlling relationships. If an adolescent has a dating partner that does not want him or her connecting with others, and expects the adolescent to spend all of his or her time with the dating partner, these are signs of an unhealthy relationship and possibly one that will become abusive (Miga, Hare, Allen, & Manning, 2010; O'Leary & Slep, 2003).
- Adolescents should be developing their own interests and learning what kinds of community connections work for them. They then are more likely to find compatible dating partners among individuals who share their interests.
- Provide opportunities for youth to get involved in activities that connect them to the community. Development of a civic identity during adolescence increases the likelihood that youth will stay civically engaged during adulthood (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Adolescents who are engaged in their communities are more likely to develop social networks where they can find sources of support for different types of needs.
- Introduce youth to the value of receiving education and/or counseling support at different points in their lives for strengthening their relationships. Often adults do not seek outside assistance for their relationships because they have been taught to believe that it is a sign of weakness or a source of embarrassment to seek such support. If as youth, however, individuals are taught that relationship education and counseling are valuable tools that can strengthen a relationship and help overcome relationship obstacles, they may be more open to seeking the information/support they need in adulthood.



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Conclusion

Antoine de Saint-Exupery has said, “Life has taught us that love does not consist of gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.” Research indicates that connectedness is key to healthy and stable couples. As couples learn to draw strength from others, look for meaning and purpose, and reach out to others and their communities, they help themselves individually, their relationship, and the world around them to blossom.

Implications for Practice



- Generate a list of resources available in your community that you can use to refer individuals and couples to for additional support (e.g., counselors, marriage and family therapists, agencies offering couple and relationship education workshops, faith-based organizations). Identify barriers to accessing those resources (e.g., location, differing relationship values, trust issues, racial disproportionality) and strategies for overcoming them.
- Create and/or promote opportunities in the community that bring couples together and/or strengthen relationships and marriages. This could include offering workshops, coordinating community dance or dinner events where couples can get to know each other and build relationships, promoting awards to recognize healthy relationships (e.g., Couple of the Year Award, 40 Years Together Award, etc.), sharing Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and other community messages through local radio and printed media outlets.
- Collaborate with others within the community to organize projects or advocacy efforts that relate to the development of positive relationships. Recruit and involve couples in healthy and stable marriages from the community to volunteer as program facilitators or mentors for other couples.
- Encourage couples to do at least one activity a week focused on building their social support network with others. This might include making a visit to see extended family, going out with other couples, or getting involved in a community or faith group.
- Ask individuals or couples to map out a list of family members and friends that they can count on for support; instruct them to identify people who can contribute positively to the relationship rather than negatively.
- Have partners individually make a list of causes that they feel passionate about and would like to contribute to in some way. Encourage partners to share their lists and try to identify a cause(s) that they have in common. (Sharing of the lists could also be a time when couples get to *know* each other further.) Couples can then identify ways to jointly contribute to the cause on a regular basis.



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