



## Connect

### *Engaging in a Positive Social Network of Support*

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#### 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.

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

## 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.



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



## 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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