

How Stress Affects a Relationship

It's important to understand how stressful events affect your marriage.

Couples often go through periods of change, every day hassles and emotional issues that cause stress in their relationships.

We all have stress in our lives, whether it is job-related, financial, marital, or parental. It can cause uncomfortable mental and physical reactions to life's events. This challenges your marital relationship.

It's important to understand how stressful events affect your marriage. Since you can't avoid it, you have to be able to recognize and manage it. Finding a way to have a conversation about what is causing you stress, where you both finish the talk feeling relieved and satisfied, can make your relationship stronger. Here are some tips on how to handle stress in your relationship.



Figure Out What is Bothering You

Take the time to find out what the problem is and then share it with your spouse.

Stress is tricky. We often say "I'm so stressed out!" but may have trouble figuring out what is causing it. Take the time to find out what the problem is and then share it with your spouse. Your partner may be able to help you deal with your stress. With increased awareness

of what you are worried about, he/she can think of ways to keep from adding to your stress.

Bear in mind that your partner may not think you have any reason to be stressed. Help him/her understand why you are. Respect each other's values and find ways to work together on the challenges. Your partner can give you a different point of view and together you can brainstorm ways to solve the issue that is causing your stress. Recognize that not every problem (or stressor) has a solution, but talking about it and sharing your feelings can help you manage it. Understand that if you don't figure out how to successfully handle stress with your partner, problems in your marriage may emerge.

Stay Connected

Sometimes couples spend more time talking with their friends than their spouses about issues because they feel their partner might not understand them. Turning away from your partner during stressful events can be one of the most damaging behaviors in a relationship. This can lead to feelings of rejection. Silence leads to greater frustration and increased anger, which can drive the two of you apart.

Try to strengthen your relationship by turning to each other often. You can do this by simply talking about the every-day events that happen in your lives, like the news, a good movie you saw, or the accomplishments of your children. This builds the confidence and trust you both need so you can discuss heavier and potentially stressful topics when they arise.

Maintain Intimacy

Intimacy is an important part of any successful marriage. While many people think intimacy pertains only to sex, it is much more than that. Being intimate with your partner means that you reveal your thoughts and your feelings (even though it may be embarrassing to do so), demonstrate affection, and work together to solve problems. By being open and honest we develop emotional intimacy. When we are stressed this is especially important. Intimacy gives your partner a chance to support you and in return, you are more likely to support them when they are stressed.

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Couples might avoid becoming intimate with their partner during stressful times because they are too tired or emotionally drained, but this can be a mistake. Being intimate actually helps relieve tension and anxiety.

Find Balance

You can become overwhelmed with activities that you really don't have time for. This can cause problems in your relationship and with the entire family. The more time spent on other things, the less time there is for the family.

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Research has shown that work stress is linked to unhappiness in marriage. Don't be a workaholic by choosing to stay connected through cell phones, emails and other technology. This can cause your partner to feel lonely and will hurt your relationship.

Parents can feel like keeping up with each family member's schedule is a full time job. Scheduling the children's activities and taking them to practices, games, recitals and events can get to be too much. To avoid family burn-out keep an eye out for signs of stress and cut back on activities as needed.

If you are feeling overwhelmed and don't know how to get back on track to a healthy marriage, it is a good idea to take a relationship education course. Marriage education can give you the skills, information and resources you need to help manage your stress and make your relationship better. Make time to enjoy each other and work on your relationship.

The kind of husband, wife, mother, father, or friend you are is shown by your actions and attitudes. Be watchful of long periods of loneliness, depression or mood swings in yourself or in your partner. If you see these signs, be willing to help or get help. Try to be aware of you and your partner's emotions every day. Change the things in your life, or in your relationship, that you can control and accept the things that you cannot change.

Stress can come in many forms. The one thing you can count on is that it will be in your life. Try to remember that everyone handles stress differently. In other words, what causes one person to "stress-out" may be something that another person can easily handle. There is no cure-all for the stress that occurs in our lives, but we do have a choice about how we react to it. You and your spouse can together make an effort to control your thoughts and behaviors. Choose to lessen the effects of stress by communicating with each other. Communication also keeps one partner from feeling lonely, builds trust, shows commitment and can release the heavy burdens that you are feeling. Be kind, caring and show affection. Be aware of life's stressors and don't let them drive you and your partner apart.

Additional Resources:

Chained to the Desk: A Guidebook for Workaholics, Their Partners and Children, and the Clinicians That Treat Them, B.E. Robinson, NYU Press, 2007

Linking Economic Hardship to Marital Quality and Instability. R.D. Conger et al, Journal of Marriage and Family, 52, p.643-656, 1990.