



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Entering into and maintaining a loving relationship can be one of the most rewarding experiences in life. In the early stages of a relationship, we often focus most of our energy and attention on our partner and the relationship. We spend a lot of time talking and listening to one another - we share our thoughts, interests, feelings, and dreams. Laughter and compromise come easy. At this point in time, the relationship may seem effortless.

However, as we move through life with our partner, we will undoubtedly be faced with challenges and obstacles. What can happen is that we get so caught up in the day to day demands of life that we may end up giving very little attention to our relationship. There may be times when differences and difficulties seem to predominate the relationship.

None of us enters a loving relationship expecting to someday feel at odds with our partner. Yet the prevalence of breakups and divorce is a testament that reality can fall short of expectations. Fortunately, many couples are seeking solutions instead of exits. They are finding the courage to question and take responsibility for their choices and actions. They realize that healthy relationships don't just happen overnight or just because a couple is in love. Building and maintaining a mutually satisfying relationship takes commitment, time and ongoing effort.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

BUILDING BLOCK #1

KEEPING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

We hear about the importance of communication all of the time, and without a doubt, effective communication is an essential building block to a healthy, satisfying relationship. The reality is that communicating effectively is often easier said than done. It seems that in relating with our loved ones, we can easily fall into some pitfalls that can actually shut down the lines of communication. In relationships that are strained, it is common to find partners saying of each other - "he or she just doesn't understand" or "he or she never hears a word I say." Such comments point to a need to focus on and improve communication skills.

TAKING ACTION:

- ▲ Listen, Listen, and Listen some more! There is an saying that the reason that we were born with two ears and with one mouth is that we need to listen twice as much as we speak. This speaks to just how important listening is, and that when we listen, our goal is to understand our partner. A first step to understanding our partner is to listen without interrupting. When couples have difficulty listening to each other, I sometimes suggest they pass notes for a while, says Martha Burch, an EAP counsellor with Warren Shepell Consultants. Getting things down on paper, then taking the time to read and respond can help both partners learn to slow down and focus their attention. Ask your partner for clarification. If you are picking up a mixed message, try something like, "I'm confused. You say nothing's wrong, but your voice sounds unhappy. I care and I want to know what's going on with you."
- ▲ Remember, even though we may have the sense that our partners know us inside out, we cannot expect them to be mind readers. If we want our partners to understand us, we need to speak up and say what we mean.
- ▲ Choose the right time to talk about something important. For instance, it's probably not a good idea to bring up a sensitive issue just before bedtime. It may be necessary to set up a specific time to talk with our partner.
- ▲ Keep outside distractions to a minimum. Turn off the TV, find a quiet room or take a walk to have important discussions.
- ▲ Fight fair. Arguing one's point of view and disagreeing are bound to happen in every relationship. In healthy relationships, couples will argue or disagree without putting down their partner. Avoid comments that manipulate ('If you loved me you would'), absolutes ('you always' or 'you never') and labeling ('you're stingy'). When couples fight fairly, they let respect for their partners override their anger. They also know and respect each other limits and call for a time-out. As one man put it, "If I find things are getting too heated, I tell my wife I'm going out for an hour to work in the garden and calm down."

BUILDING BLOCK #2

PROBLEM SOLVING ...TAKING A REALISTIC APPROACH

Problems are an expected part of any relationship. The difference between a healthy relationship and a strained relationship is not necessarily the type or number of problems. The difference lies in how problems are resolved.

When it comes right down to it, problems are situations that require our attention, decision, and action. Within a relationship, effective problem solving in the long run involves having a game plan for how problems will be handled when they arise and working together to make it happen.

TAKING ACTION:

- ▲ The first step is setting a time aside to discuss strategies for problem solving. This needs to be done during a problem free time. There are a number of useful steps to include in a problem solving strategy.
- ▲ Discuss the problem in its entirety. Gather as much information as possible in order to understand the situation. This includes learning about how people feel about the problem as well as gathering facts. A common pitfall is to start solving the problem before we have considered all aspects of the situation.
- ▲ Together, generate various possible solutions. This is the step that can be the biggest challenge for most couples. A common tendency is to get stuck on one option - usually one we suggested. Another tendency is to begin criticizing ideas before we have all of our options on the table. Once we have come up with a number of options, discuss the pros and cons of each. It is helpful to think of the options as 'our ideas,' rather than 'your idea' or 'my idea.' These guidelines create an atmosphere that encourages creativity and cooperation. It is likely that we will build on each others ideas and they will truly become 'our ideas.'
- ▲ Ultimately, decision making is affected by each partner's beliefs and values. That's why it's important to take the time to find out why a certain option or decision is important to our partner and vice versa. Often times when we hear the reasoning behind a preference, we are able to accept it. Or if not, we are able to work towards new options that will be acceptable to both partners, because we now look for options that will respect underlying beliefs and values.
- ▲ Select the best option. Even though the pros and cons have been identified, often times there are a few options that emerge as good possibilities. It is common for couples to get stuck at this step. If time permits, it can be helpful to take a break at this point and come back with a fresh outlook. The old saying, 'I'll sleep on it', allows us time to independently think through the options. It's amazing how reasonable we can be if we take the time to reason with ourselves!
- ▲ Test the decision. Agreeing upon a schedule for household tasks and trying it for a one month period is an example of testing a decision.
- ▲ Follow up and evaluate. It's important to look at the outcome of our decision to see what is working, what is not working and to get feedback from all concerned. If one option or system doesn't seem to be working out, then the next step involves making some slight revisions or going back to the option list and trying something different.

It's important to be aware that problem solving with our partner is a skill that we must develop over time. Things may not run smoothly at first or with every situation. The key is to remember that like most things in life, things get easier with practice.

BUILDING BLOCK #3

KEEP THOSE LOVING CONNECTIONS ALIVE

In the honeymoon stage of a relationship, it seems the closeness, fun, and romance will last forever. However, loving connections can fall by the wayside as we turn our attention to work, family, and other concerns. Again, loving connections don't just happen, we have to make them happen.

TAKING ACTION:

- ▲ Make a special effort to demonstrate thoughtfulness; 'a phone call just to say Hi. I'm thinking of you'; 'a sincere compliment'; 'an invitation to lunch'. Reminiscence about times that were fun, romantic or when you felt close to your partner.
- ▲ Go out on a date! Rekindling romance is hard to do in the midst of family or household responsibilities. It is often helpful to make a date to do

something together as a couple on a regular basis. For couples with children, this would involve arranging for childcare. Taking turns organizing the details of the date can add to the enjoyment.

- ▲ Give yourself permission to be playful and creative. Often times when couples make a commitment to work harder at their relationships, they forget to build in time to play, Burych says.
- ▲ It's important to develop interests and activities that can be done as a couple and things that we do on our own. Sharing an enjoyable hobby can go a long way in building connections while pursuing our own interests will often provide for interesting conversations with our partner.
- ▲ Make plans for the future. A couple can strengthen their sense of togetherness by making plans for the future and work together towards those goals. It is important to consider what each partner might want for themselves as well as for the relationship. For instance, if it is really important for one person to return to school, how will that impact the goal of buying a house? Perhaps it will mean postponing the house purchase or going to school part-time. In healthy relationships, couples look for ways to align individual goals and goals that they have as a couple.

WHERE TO START?

- ▲ When we think about improving our relationship, we have a tendency to focus on the flaws and weaknesses in our relationship. However, it is very important to identify and value our relationship strengths - those things that we do well most of the time. Then, begin by identifying one or two action tips that make sense and give them a try. Remember that progress occurs little by little, one step at a time.
- ▲ Many couples have found that they have benefited from meeting with a professional EAP counsellor. The counsellor can help identify areas to begin working on as well as strategies that are a good fit for the couple.
- ▲ Relationship building may sound like a lot of work, but by taking small steps together, the potential rewards that come from a satisfying, healthy relationship are endless.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765
French Service: 1-800-361-5676
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