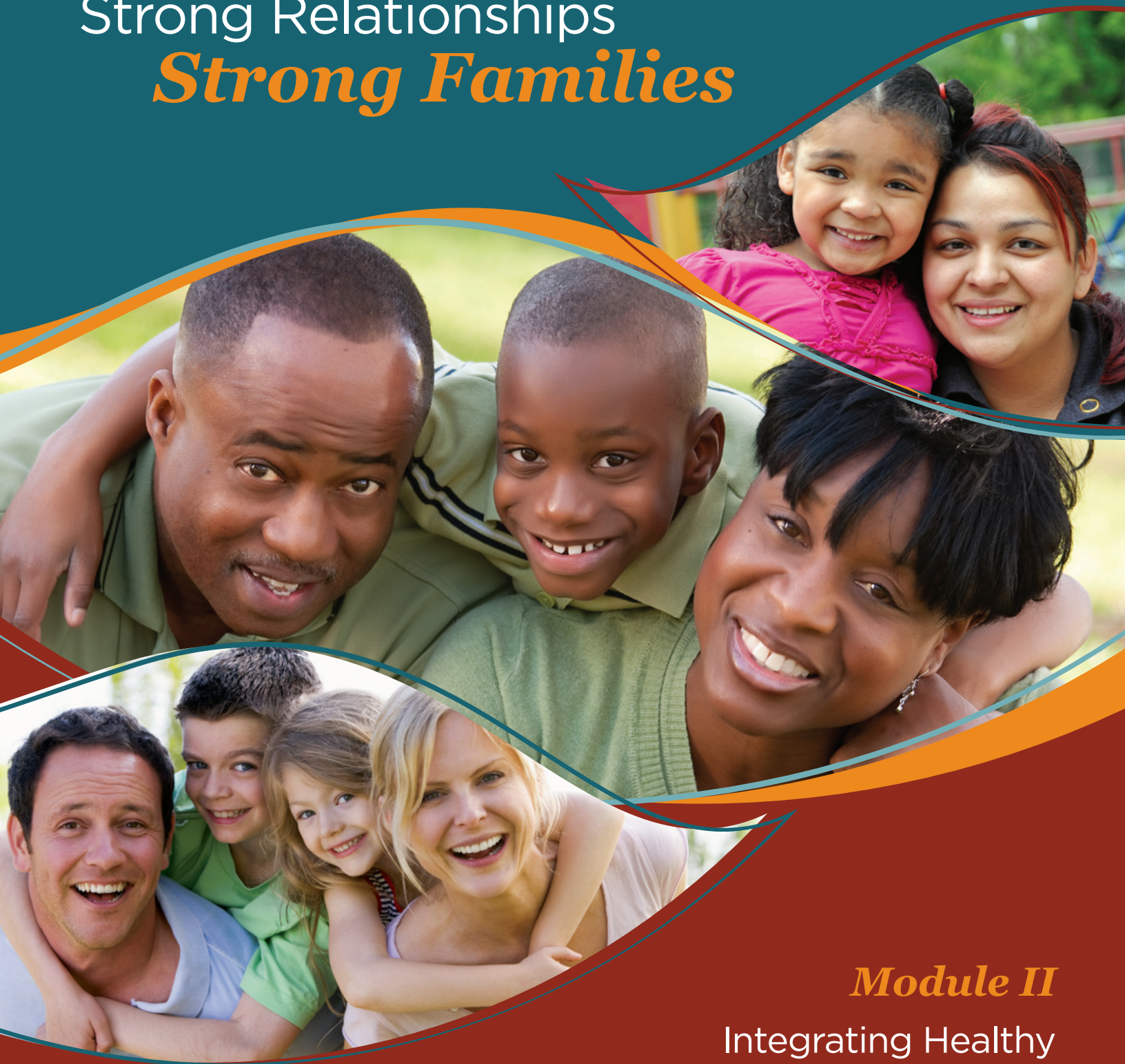




NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER for
HEALTHY MARRIAGE *and* FAMILIES

Strong Relationships *Strong Families*



Module II

Integrating Healthy
Relationship Education Skills
into Social Services



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Introduction

The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families promotes the value of healthy marriage and relationship education skills and encourages their integration into safety-net service systems as a holistic approach to strengthening families. A service of the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, United States Department of Health and Human Services, the Resource Center offers a variety of tools and resources designed to educate interested stakeholders in the benefits of integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into existing social service systems. It also provides a range of training, services, and support to interested State, Local, and Tribal government agencies as they work to integrate these healthy marriage and relationship education skills into their existing services in order to best support the families served in their communities.

This is Module II of the *Strong Relationships, Strong Families* curriculum: *Integrating Healthy Relationship Education Skills into Social Services*. Module I, *Introduction to Healthy Relationship Education Skills for Stakeholders*, focused on the following objectives:

- Educate safety-net service providers and other stakeholders on the subject of healthy marriage and relationship education skills.
- Discuss the research regarding the benefits of these skills for families and importance of integrating the skills into safety-net service delivery systems.
- Define levels of integration and how the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families can support integration efforts.

While each module is designed to be independent, Module I should be considered a prerequisite for those with little or no familiarity with healthy marriage education skills and how they can be integrated to support the goals of safety-net service providers working to move families to self-sufficiency.

The term *safety-net service providers* refers to governmental agencies and programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child support enforcement, child welfare, labor and workforce services, and Head Start, along with other stakeholders who provide military community and family services, education, youth independent living, and Tribal services.

Module II of this series offers a research-based curriculum adapted from the Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training curriculum, which was developed under a grant (90CT0151) from the Children's Bureau in the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, in partnership with the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network. Module II covers seven key aspects of healthy relationships that interconnect with self-sufficiency and well-being. Each chapter includes tips, techniques, and resources to equip stakeholders to integrate healthy relationship skill development into existing social services. The seven chapters in Module II are:

- **Chapter 1. Care for Self: Being Physically and Mentally Healthy.** Discusses the importance of caring for one's own mental and physical well-being, including the interconnection between self-care and healthy relationships.
- **Chapter 2. Getting to Know Partners Well.** Emphasizes that an awareness and understanding of one's partner must be maintained and grown through sustained effort over time.
- **Chapter 3. Nurturing the Relationship.** Focuses on devoting time and energy in order to strengthen and grow a relationship.
- **Chapter 4. Showing Affection and Respect.** Describes strengths-based processes that can help partners demonstrate care towards each other.

- **Chapter 5. Developing and Maintaining Friendship.** Highlights the need for friendship between partners and the importance of continually working to build that friendship.
- **Chapter 6. Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways.** Identifies healthy skills for managing the conflict that is inevitable in a relationship.
- **Chapter 7. Engaging in a Positive Social Network.** Stresses the benefits of having a strong support network outside of the relationship.

Each chapter is divided into the following three sections:

- **Learning Objectives.** Lists the main competencies or objectives that the chapter is designed to meet.
- **Key Concept.** Provides research-based information regarding one of the seven key concepts covered in this curriculum. This section explains the concept and its relevance, and offers general tips for implementing the concept in everyday life.
- **Practice Tools.** Provides talking points and tools to help service providers apply the key concept in practice. Most can be adapted for use with various populations in various settings.
 - *Conversation starters* offer safety-net service providers ways to engage individuals and families in discussions related to healthy relationship skills. They can be used in a group setting or one-on-one with clients at an office or home visit.
 - *Activities*, like conversation starters, are designed to be interactive. Unlike conversation starters, activities are meant to be used when a service provider has more time to spend with individuals (including staff for staff development) or families to explain the activity and the associated key concept. These activities can be facilitated one-on-one or in a family or other group setting.
 - *Informational handouts* provide supplemental materials based on the concepts presented in the chapter. Native language, literacy levels, and cultural practices should be considered when selecting materials to share and determining how to teach skills. The materials are for safety-net service providers:
 - To place in reception areas, waiting rooms, or local community centers to educate the general population (primary prevention); and
 - To hand out to individuals and families for general education or reinforcement of key concepts.

Throughout the chapters, boxes call out key points and practical tips for building and strengthening healthy relationships.

Although nearly everyone can benefit from enhancing the skills underlying healthy marriages, healthy marriage and relationship education is neither a safety intervention nor a panacea. Rather, it should be integrated into existing service delivery systems as a holistic, preventive approach to strengthening families (see Module I for more information). Couples or families experiencing intimate partner violence, abuse, or chronic neglect may have more immediate intervention needs that should be prioritized accordingly. Throughout the chapters, there are **safety flags** that emphasize that healthy relationship education should be considered in a preventive context and to highlight tips and indicators for unhealthy or unsafe relationships.

Chapter 1

Care for Self: Being Physically and Mentally Healthy

Healthy relationships start with healthy individuals. This chapter describes how individual health is interconnected with relationship health and explains the need for individuals to take responsibility for and care of their own mental and physical health.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the triangular correlation between individual well-being, healthy relationships, and family self-sufficiency.
- Identify strategies for improving individual well-being.
- Learn strategies for teaching the importance of self-care.

Key Concept

Healthy, stable relationships not only help produce better mental and physical health in individuals, but are also a *result* of better individual health. Incorporation of a healthy lifestyle can be just as influential to relationships as communication, connection, and other relationship-based factors. While continuously devoting attention to the couple relationship is important, bolstering *individual* strengths is central to supporting couple relationships as well. It is difficult to encourage health in others or our relationships when we are not healthy ourselves.

Individual well-being involves both the absence of illness or unhealthy habits and incorporation of healthy habits and behaviors into one's lifestyle. It involves both emotional/mental and physical domains.

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

There are several strategies that collectively help individuals experience mental and emotional well-being. These no-cost strategies all involve shifts in the way a person thinks, perceives information, and reacts to information. There are also potential financial savings when these strategies are used successfully; individuals can reduce the negative impact of stress and experience stronger relationships—both at home and in the workplace.

A Positive, Optimistic Perspective

Greater overall optimism and positivity contribute to an individual's health. Those who are more positive and optimistic tend to fare better in relationships—in selecting a partner, having positive interactions, and remaining in such relationships.

Tips for easing stress

- **Humor** – learning to be lighthearted in the midst of highly emotional times can help ease or break the tension.
- **Mindfulness** – learning to “be present”—purposely focused only on the present moment and accepting it for what it is—can help bring a sense of calmness to you.
- **Positive self-talk** – learning to be the positive voice inside of your head instead of the negative one can help you leave past failures or bad experiences behind. For example, instead of saying, “Oh, I can't believe I did that,” try saying, “I know I can do better next time.”

Mindfulness

Mindfulness means purposefully being aware of the present in a neutral, non-judgmental way. Rather than focusing on bad experiences from the past or stressors and concerns about the future, being mindful allows a person to put such thoughts aside and focus on the current moment (to live in the “now”). Mindfulness tends to open a person up to options and perspectives. It takes practice, but with practice mindfulness can reduce stress and anxiety. This increased mindfulness relates to greater individual wellness and relationship satisfaction.

Healthy Stress Management

Well-adjusted individuals use positive, rather than destructive, forms of stress management. Examples of destructive stress management techniques that lead to poor adjustment include substance abuse; overeating; and eating high fat, salty, or sugary foods as “comfort” foods. Healthy ways to manage stress include physical exercise, relaxation, or breathing techniques and talking through issues with a friend or partner.

Physical Well-Being

There are several different aspects to physical well-being. This section focuses on three key aspects that impact marital and couple relationships—healthy eating, physical activity, and sleep. Investments in physical well-being and relationship health can benefit the individual, the couple, and the workforce. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reviewed the literature linking marital status and health and found that marriage has significant positive effects on health behaviors, health care access and use, and physical health and longevity (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2000). While better health is a consequence of healthy marriages, better mental and physical health also has emerged as a significant *predictor* of higher marital quality (Zhang, Chen, McCubbin, McCubbin, & Foley, 2011).

Healthy Eating

Overeating, under-eating, and other unhealthy eating patterns are all directly related to several health-related illnesses. Nutrition education is one way to promote healthy eating as an investment in individual well-being. However, sometimes nutritious foods such as fresh meats, fruits, and vegetables seem out of reach to families struggling to make ends meet. Safety-net service providers can provide information about local food pantries, WIC locations, and

SAFETY FLAG

Strategies to promote mental and emotional well-being such as mindfulness and positivity contribute to individual health, regardless of individual circumstances. A correlation between intimate partner violence and poor mental and physical health outcomes is well-established; however, healthy relationship education is preventive and not intended as intervention for couples already experiencing severe conflict (Berger et al., 2012). In certain cases, referral to professional, evidence-based counseling (e.g., Behavioral Couples Therapy or Domestic Conflict Containment Program) or domestic violence intervention (e.g., shelter or law enforcement referral) is the most appropriate immediate course of action.

Tips for making healthier eating choices

- Eat more fruits and vegetables (especially dark green and orange-colored) each day.
- Eat more whole grains—choose whole grain breads and pastas instead of white.
- Keep meat and dairy properly refrigerated. Make sure to cook meat until it has reached the right temperature or turns from red/pink to brown.
- Look at saturated fat and cholesterol amounts on food labels, and limit the overall fat and cholesterol that you eat. Choose low-fat options.
- Avoid foods that have a lot of sugar and salt in them. Choose foods labeled “no added sugar” or “low sodium” or ones that do not have sugar as one of the first three ingredients listed.

healthy eating on a budget (see *How to Eat Healthy on a Low Budget* handout) to address this potential barrier.

Another way individuals can improve their eating practices and strengthen their family relationships is by eating meals together. A nationwide survey of 1,003 adolescents, aged 12 to 17, conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2012), showed several positive outcomes connected to family meals. Respondents who frequently ate together as a family reported being one-and-a-half times more likely to rate high relationship satisfaction with parents. Respondents reporting three to five family meals per week were one-and-a-half times less likely to report high levels of stress, or engage in abuse of tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana. Moreover, meals that are consumed in a positive, supportive family context (as opposed to alone) tend to be more nutritious, regardless of socioeconomic status (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). Family dinners can also be rituals that bring the family together to connect with and support one another.

Physical Activity

Getting the appropriate amount of physical activity contributes to a large number of health benefits. Family and couple relationship patterns can influence this, since individuals often point to a lack of family or partner support as a barrier to becoming more physically active. The mutual support and companionship gained by joint physical activity has been linked to increased physical activity and greater relationship satisfaction and commitment. Physical activity also increases physical functioning and lifespan—adults who are able to work better and longer over their life course while remaining healthy enough to enjoy the benefits of self-sufficiency together.

Sleep

All individuals need the right amount of sleep to be healthy. Either too little or too much sleep is associated with health and emotional problems. Patterns of sleep are as important as the amount of sleep, with disordered sleep patterns (e.g., frequent awakenings and inconsistent sleep/wake times) contributing to individual and relationship dysfunction.

Tips to add more physical activity into your day

- **Exercise with a partner. You can support and motivate each other.**
- **Try walking at a brisk pace, doing housework like sweeping or vacuuming a floor, pushing a lawnmower, or dancing. Doctors recommend 30 minutes of moderate activity five or more days per week.**
- **Do at least 10 minutes of exercise at a time.**
- **Include both aerobic exercise and strength building exercises.**

Major Health Issues and Relationships

Individual mental and physical health problems can have serious consequences for the quality of romantic relationships, just as relationships can impact individual health. For example, individuals who struggle with a diagnosable mental illness such as clinical depression can face additional challenges in their relationships related to their mental health. Symptoms of an individual's illness can spill over into the relationship and cause harm. Negative thoughts that accompany depression can become focused on a partner's shortcomings or relationship troubles, and can interfere with the mental and emotional well-being strategies described above. Addressing issues in the relationship may not be useful unless mental health is also addressed. However, partners can be involved in the healing and maintenance process, which can be beneficial to both the mentally ill individual and the relationship.

Physical health problems also can harm relationships, especially if they are ongoing. Having to deal with sudden or chronic health issues can become a significant stressor for families. Families may have to devote time, energy, and money to care for an ill individual. Partners may not know how to address the health issue or may fear severe negative outcomes (e.g., death), which can lead to feelings of

isolation rather than connection. Couples must learn how to cope with such situations; mutual coping and support can have positive impacts on physical health. Such support may be particularly beneficial when a couple's relationship already has a strong foundation.

Sexual satisfaction also is linked to the physical and emotional well-being of each partner. For example, side effects of some medication can impact sexual desire. There are countless other influences that affect a sexual relationship, including sexual history. Service providers working in public and mental health settings may be in the best position to facilitate or encourage clients to have open communication with their intimate partner about physical and mental issues tied to a couple's sexual connectivity.

Tips for a healthy sexual relationship

- **Be open about sexual desires.** This requires knowing yourself and your wants enough to talk freely about them in private with your partner.
- **Set the mood early.** Foreplay happens way before you make it to the bedroom; showing affection and respect and having fun together sets the mood for romance.
- **Share power.** A healthy balance of influence in the relationship is crucial for creating intimacy. Think about ways that you and your partner can share.

Summary

Strong, stable relationships are composed of healthy interaction patterns between the couple *and* healthy lifestyles of the individuals in the relationship. The mental and physical health of both partners affects couple interactions and overall relationship quality. Taking care of a relationship simultaneously requires taking care of oneself—mentally, emotionally, and physically. In addition to the impact on the family directly, poor physical and mental health can also make it difficult to sustain employment, maintain a home, care for young children, or follow through on other important tasks related to maintaining the family's self-sufficiency.

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Chapter 1 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Taking care of oneself is an integral part of taking care of a relationship. The health of marital and couple relationships is interconnected with each partner's mental and physical well-being. This applies to parent-child relationships as well; physically and mentally healthy parents are better equipped to properly care for their children.



Chapter 1 Conversation Starters

Exploring mental and emotional well-being:

- With all those things going on, how are you managing to do as well as you're doing?
- How did you manage to stay sober for a whole week (considering how long you've been drinking and how tough this week's been)? How did you find out what helps you when you get the urge?
- What do you think your kids would say you are doing that's helping them feel more at ease?

Exploring physical well-being:

- Your [son/daughter] sure is active. You must need a lot of energy to keep up with [him/her]. How do you do it?
- I know you have a lot going on right now, so are you finding time to take care of yourself? What are you doing to stay active?

Body Image 1

(For use with youth and young adults in a group setting)

This activity is designed to generate discussion regarding the sometimes unrealistic expectations youth have about their bodies and the negative behaviors that can result.

SET UP: Ask for examples of how acting on unrealistic expectations about body image, which is often driven by media and peers, can harm social, physical, and emotional growth. Examples can include skipping meals or taking diet pills, which can lead to poor nutrition and difficulty learning. Extreme efforts to lose weight can lead to eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. Girls are also more likely to try to lose weight in unhealthy ways such as smoking. Boys also are at risk of developing unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders as they struggle with body changes and pay more attention to media images of the “ideal” muscular male.

ACTIVITY: Have participants write down five things that they like about themselves. This can be anything—accomplishments or things they are good at doing. However, it can’t be anything about physical looks or appearance.

DEBRIEF: Have participants discuss how these things improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. For example, youth who are involved in a physical activity will have stronger muscles and bones, have a leaner body because exercise helps control body fat, be less likely to become overweight, decrease the risk of developing certain health problems, and have a better outlook on life. Besides enjoying the health benefits of regular exercise, youth who are physically fit sleep better and are better able to handle physical and emotional challenges—from running to catch a bus to studying for a test.

Body Image 2

(For use with adults with mental limitations or young children)

Use a doll, skeleton, or simple body drawing. Point to different body parts (head, arms, legs) and ask individuals how they take care of those parts. Include a discussion of the brain (head), teeth (mouth), bones, and muscles, prompting the person as needed.

Physical Health – Stretch!

(For use with individuals, groups, or families)

This activity is designed to demonstrate to individuals how easy it is to integrate physical activity into their days.

SET UP: This can be used during a long meeting with staff or a client, to break up a child and family team meeting, or integrated into parent-teacher nights or group workshops. Service providers can teach individuals and families to integrate stretching once or twice per day into their routine, such as during commercial breaks on TV, first thing in the morning, or right before bed.

ACTIVITY: Say the following:

- Today we are going to stretch. Please stand up and join me in today's stretch. First, take a deep breath and reach both hands toward the sky as high as you can without hurting your back. Reach all the way through your fingertips. Wiggle your fingers if you'd like. Breathe in and out normally (allow them to do this for about 10-20 seconds).
- Exhale and slowly lower your hands back to your waist.
- Inhale and bend forward at the waist, letting your arms dangle in front of you or rest on your knees. Let your head hang down. Let your knees bend slightly so they do not lock up. Breathe in and out normally (allow them to do this for about 10-20 seconds). Slowly stand up.
- Inhale and bring both arms behind you as far as you can comfortably, clasping your fingers together if you'd like. Imagine your chest opening up and pushing forward. Keep your head even; don't look up or down. Breathe in and out normally (allow them to do this for about 10-20 seconds). Bring your arms gently back to your sides.
- Inhale and bring your arms together in front of you, clasp your fingers together and bow your head slightly. Breathe in and out normally (allow them to do this for about 10-20 seconds). Slowly bring your arms back to your sides and your head back to even.
- Thank you. I hope you enjoyed today's break. Hopefully this break has provided you with the energy [for our next activity or to go about your day].

¹ Adapted from U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Institute of Health (n.d.). *Energize our families: Curriculum for parents and caregivers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan_mats/parent_curr.pdf

Goals for Better Health**(For use with individuals, groups, or families)**

This activity is designed to help individuals consider ideas for improving their individual and family health.

Ask individuals to reflect on the following questions and write down their answers.

- If in a group setting, ask for volunteers to share their responses.
- If you are leading a group of couples, ask the last three questions of the group and allow time for the couples to discuss their responses with each other only rather than with the full group.

GOALS FOR BETTER HEALTH

Reflect on the following questions and write down your answers.

1. List several ways you already take good care of yourself:

2. List several ways you would like to take better care of yourself:

3. How can you make those changes?

4. What else might need to change for you to be successful?

5. Who can you turn to for help in reaching your goals?

6. How can your partner help you make these changes?

7. How can you encourage your partner to take care of himself or herself?

8. How might the changes you listed for yourself and your partner affect your relationship?

Foster Parenting and Stress

Foster parenting is a learn-as-you-go effort. No one can ready you for the stress level you are sure to experience. When you make a commitment to be a foster parent—whether formally through a child welfare agency or informally by taking in a family member’s child—you know up front that you and others in your household will be challenged in many ways.

SOURCES OF FOSTER PARENT STRESS

Stress caused by money issues, work issues, family issues, and home-life issues exist for all families. But foster parents experience these stressors and more:

- Just as every child is unique, so is every foster parenting situation, which makes “getting used to the job” challenging. Even experienced foster parents often are surprised by feelings of inexperience and inadequacy that are introduced with the arrival of a new foster child. Plus, the adjustment involves everyone in the household, including your own children and other foster kids that may be living with you at the time. So the stress is multiplied among and felt by many people.
- Foster children often are experiencing behavioral or health issues, learning disorders, or emotional problems, which can be draining on the care provider.
- Dealing with the biological family, social workers, and mental or physical health care providers can be helpful; yet at the same time they can be another source of stress.
- Bonds are created among foster children and foster families. Saying good-bye and the associated grief is another source of stress.
- The added workload of a larger family (more to cook, more to clean, more laundry, more schoolwork to monitor, and more activities to attend) can zap your energy and resources.

WHY YOUR STRESS LEVEL MATTERS

By their nature, foster parents tend to be selfless, generous people. And with so many children in unstable and often dire situations, it may seem selfish to think of your own needs, too. But you must for the sake of:

- The foster children you are caring for. You cannot be an effective foster parent if you are exhausted and burned out. Stress may manifest itself in negative ways if healthy outlets are not identified.
- Your marriage. Remember that a stable home life is essential to be an effective foster parent. If your marriage is strained, this instability will spill over onto your own children and your foster children.
- Your relationships with other family members, including your children and friends. You don’t want to damage your vital social support system.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO RELIEVE STRESS

Ways you can minimize stress and optimize your effectiveness as a foster parent include:

- Set a schedule and stick to it. Routine will help you keep up and provide consistency and stability in your household.
- Don't try to be a miracle worker. Remember your role is to provide a nurturing, loving, and stable home environment that will allow your foster child an opportunity to heal and to succeed at school and in relationships. Focusing your attention on one or two issues at a time will keep you—and your foster child—from feeling overwhelmed and overtasked.
- Divide up household responsibilities so that you aren't doing it all.
- Take advantage of respite opportunities. Trained respite workers can relieve you, or you can work out trades among other approved foster parents. If you are providing kinship care as an unlicensed foster care provider, seek help from other family members. Respite opportunities may not be ideal, but you need to use them to rejuvenate and spend quality time with your spouse, your friends, and by yourself.
- Make use of foster parent support groups to share concerns. Or perhaps you would get more out of a book club or running club that is completely separate and outside of your foster parenting world.
- Find a stress-relieving technique that you can use almost anytime, anywhere, throughout the day.



Tips for Preventing and Coping with Caregiver Stress²

Giving care to someone who depends on you—including someone with special needs, mental health issues, or chronic medical problems—is hard work. It can be both rewarding and exhausting. Exhaustion, worry, lack of resources, and demands of constant care can cause great stress. This stress plus lack of attention to your own well-being can put you at increased risk for health problems. Family caregivers are at risk for depression, not getting enough sleep, infections, premature aging, and chronic illness.

SIGNS OF CAREGIVER STRESS

Common signs of caregiver stress include:

- Feeling sad or moody
- Feeling uncaring or angry with the person you are helping
- Low energy level
- No time to yourself
- Trouble sleeping
- Not eating enough or eating too much
- Seeing friends and family less often
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Not making medical appointments

TIPS TO HELP

To prevent the build-up of caregiver stress, you must take care of your well-being. Think of this as a main concern, not a luxury. Honor your needs and nurture your mind, body, and spirit. Here are some specific things you can do:

- Keep up with your own health care and good health habits.
- Get eight hours of sleep each night.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, protein, and whole grains. Limit caffeine and sugar. Drink plenty of fluids.
- Exercise to reduce stress, help relax tense muscles, improve your mood, and help you sleep better. Do frequent short exercises such as walking for 10 minutes inside the house if it is hard to find large blocks of time to exercise. Try to exercise at least 20 to 30 minutes a day, three days a week. If able, have the person you care for walk or do stretching exercises with you. Set aside time for exercise.
- Make sure you have social and family respite time. Plan ahead for a break for yourself and for something you enjoy. Enjoy time away without feeling guilty.
- Look for opportunities to lighten the work.
- Try to bring other helpers onto your care giving team.
- When someone says, “Let me know how I can help” be ready to suggest a helpful job.
- Seek support and tips from other caregivers.
- Stay in touch with your sense of humor.
- Learn new ways to deal with stress.

² Adapted from Wexner Medical Center, Ohio State University. (2007). *Tips for preventing and dealing with caregiver stress*. Columbus, OH: Author.

- Consider learning how to do relaxation exercises, meditation, yoga, or other methods to help with stress.
- Think positively about your situation and your ability to solve problems.
- Recognize your successes. Try to accept things that you cannot change.
- Break a challenge into smaller parts. Take one thing at a time.
- Try not to deal with stress in unhealthy ways such as eating too much, not eating enough, smoking, drinking, or using drugs. Do not withdraw or become silent about your needs. Stay in touch with your friends and family.

If you know you are feeling overly stressed, exhausted, or depressed:

- Do not delay getting professional help. A counselor can help you cope with stress and deal with problems. A doctor can discuss holistic treatment or prescribe medicine as needed to help manage symptoms like trouble sleeping.
- Talk openly with family and friends about your feelings.
- Try to improve your self-care and get others to assist you.

Romantic Relationships and Stress

Romantic relationships can suffer under stress. We tend to think of a couple as one unit. But individuals within couples remain just that—individuals. How well or how poorly each person functions affects the relationship. Taking care of ourselves is important for a healthy relationship. How do you and your partner interact when one of you has a bad day? Or when both of you have a bad day? When you feel stressed, how do you respond if your partner asks for a favor?

List five ways you currently cope with stress:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

When it comes to stress, you may need to take some time to take care of yourself so that you can do better for your relationship and your children. It will make you a healthier, happier person to be around. It will also help you feel better equipped to take good care of others.

COPING STRATEGIES

Think about the list of five ways you cope with stress and take a look at the two lists below. Do your coping strategies tend to be pretty healthy? Are some of them unhealthy? Select two or three healthy coping strategies that you are willing to try or use more often. If there are any listed as unhealthy, see if you can identify triggers or particular stressors for using those unhealthy coping strategies. Set a realistic goal for yourself to increase your use of the healthy coping strategies in place of unhealthy ones when you notice those triggers or stressors.

Healthy Ways to Cope with Stress

- Talking to your partner or a close friend
- Going for a walk or exercising
- Meditation
- Reading a relaxing book
- Listening to music
- Doing a favorite hobby
- Eating just enough healthy food
- Going to religious services
- Prayer
- Getting enough sleep at night
- Going to a counselor
- Keeping a “thankfulness” journal

Unhealthy Ways to Cope with Stress

- Yelling, shouting, screaming, cursing
- Thinking about things that make you angry
- Smoking
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Using illegal drugs (including prescription drugs you don’t have a prescription for)
- Hurting yourself
- Hurting another person
- Eating unhealthy food
- Eating too much of anything!
- Keeping a “hatefulness” journal
- Buying things you do not really need
- Isolating yourself from others



*The Sedentary Problem*³

The percentage of overweight and obese kids and teens has more than doubled in the past 30 years. Although many factors contribute to this epidemic, children are becoming more sedentary. In other words, they're sitting around a lot more than they used to.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 8- to 18-year-olds watch about 4.5 hours of television a day. And the average kid spends 7 hours on all screen media combined (TV, videos, and DVDs; computer time outside of schoolwork; and video games).

One of the best ways to get kids to be more active is to limit the amount of time spent in sedentary activities, especially watching TV or playing video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends these limits on screen time:

- Kids under age 2 should watch no TV at all.
- Kids older than 2 should be restricted to just 1-2 hours a day of *quality* programming.

HOW MUCH EXERCISE IS ENOUGH?

Parents should help their kids get enough exercise. So, how much is enough? Kids and teens should get 60 minutes or more of physical activity daily. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education offers these activity guidelines for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers:

Age	Minimum Daily Activity	Comments
Infant	No specific requirements	Physical activity should encourage motor development
Toddler	1½ hours	30 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)
Preschooler	2 hours	60 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)
School age	1 hour or more	Break up into bouts of 15 minutes or more

Infants and young children should not be inactive for prolonged periods of time—no more than 1 hour unless they're sleeping. And school-age children should not be inactive for periods longer than 2 hours.

³ Adapted from *Kids and Exercise* at Kidshealth.org.



How to Eat Healthy on a Low Budget⁴

One of the many things people say as the reason for why they don't eat healthy food is that it costs more. It is true that a dinner built off a 99-cent menu at a fast food chain may be easy on your wallet. But with careful planning, you can spend the same amount on foods that are good for you in the grocery store and *get a lot more for your money*.

Eating out just once a day can quickly add up. If you eat a grilled chicken salad from a restaurant every day for a week it can cost around \$40 but if you buy 2 lbs. of chicken breast, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and carrots and make your own salad, the cost is about \$20. Including family members in preparing dinner can save time and give you a chance to spend quality time together. Bring snacks and a well-balanced lunch to work. Low-cost, energizing foods like spinach, whole grains, and nuts help you focus.

STEP 1: Decide on a budget for the week and plan meals ahead of time. Planning ahead helps prevent scrambling around for a cheap, fast fix when you get hungry. If you have a recipe book, look for recipes and meals you like. If you have internet access (at home or a local library), check out the U.S. Department of Agriculture's recipe finder at <http://recipefinder.nal.usda.gov/>. This has some great search features, including searching by how much it will cost to make.

Tips:

- Look at what food is already in your kitchen and build meals from there. You will spend less money and avoid buying what you already have.
- Plan meals based on items on sale in your grocery store's weekly sale paper. A few extra minutes planning your meals can result in a few extra dollars in your wallet.
- Select fresh fruits and vegetables based on when they are in season. Enjoying watermelon in the heart of winter can be expensive because there are not many places for it to grow. But when there are a lot of farms producing an item, there's competition and the cost for the fresh item at the grocery store drops. In addition to better prices, fruits and vegetables in season have the most nutrients and freshness. Look up the harvest calendar for your state at www.pickyourown.org to help you keep track of when different fruits and vegetables are in season in your area.
- If you don't have a lot of kitchen supplies, consider saving up for a crock pot (also called slow cooker) and making crock pot recipes. Most crock pot recipes are complete or nearly complete meals (meat/protein, vegetable, grain, sometimes dairy). They cook all day (8 to 10 hours) so you can safely start the meal in the morning and have it ready to eat in the evening.

STEP 2: Create a grocery list for the week and buy the groceries. When comparing prices at the grocery store, look at the "fine print"—the price per unit—and compare that. That way when the same type of food comes in different sizes or containers, it is easier to tell what is the cheapest. Bigger is not always cheaper.

Tips:

- Buy meat and poultry in bulk, especially when they are on sale. Divide them into portions enough for one meal and freeze the portions that you don't use that day.
- Don't buy fresh fruits or vegetables in bulk because they don't keep well; instead, buy bags of frozen vegetables if you can keep them frozen at home. Frozen vegetables are picked at the peak of their ripeness, which means they can be just as healthy as fresh vegetables.
- Stock up on whole grain pastas. Pasta is a staple item in a budget-friendly kitchen.

STEP 3: Prepare meals at home.

⁴ Adapted from Mercy Health Partners: Weight Management Information and Ideas. *Consumer Reports: 13 Ways to Save*. CNNhealth.com: Eating Healthy on a Shoestring Budget.



Choose My Plate

10 tips

**Nutrition
Education Series**

choose MyPlate

10 tips to a great plate



Making food choices for a healthy lifestyle can be as simple as using these 10 Tips.

Use the ideas in this list to *balance your calories*, to choose foods to *eat more often*, and to cut back on foods to *eat less often*.

1 balance calories

Find out how many calories YOU need for a day as a first step in managing your weight. Go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov to find your calorie level. Being physically active also helps you balance calories.

2 enjoy your food, but eat less

Take the time to fully enjoy your food as you eat it. Eating too fast or when your attention is elsewhere may lead to eating too many calories. Pay attention to hunger and fullness cues before, during, and after meals. Use them to recognize when to eat and when you've had enough.



3 avoid oversized portions

Use a smaller plate, bowl, and glass. Portion out foods before you eat. When eating out, choose a smaller size option, share a dish, or take home part of your meal.

4 foods to eat more often

Eat more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fat-free or 1% milk and dairy products. These foods have the nutrients you need for health—including potassium, calcium, vitamin D, and fiber. Make them the basis for meals and snacks.



5 make half your plate fruits and vegetables

Choose red, orange, and dark-green vegetables like tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and broccoli, along with other vegetables for your meals. Add fruit to meals as part of main or side dishes or as dessert.

6 switch to fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk

They have the same amount of calcium and other essential nutrients as whole milk, but fewer calories and less saturated fat.



7 make half your grains whole grains

To eat more whole grains, substitute a whole-grain product for a refined product—such as eating whole-wheat bread instead of white bread or brown rice instead of white rice.

8 foods to eat less often

Cut back on foods high in solid fats, added sugars, and salt. They include cakes, cookies, ice cream, candies, sweetened drinks, pizza, and fatty meats like ribs, sausages, bacon, and hot dogs. Use these foods as occasional treats, not everyday foods.

9 compare sodium in foods

Use the Nutrition Facts label to choose lower sodium versions of foods like soup, bread, and frozen meals. Select canned foods labeled "low sodium," "reduced sodium," or "no salt added."



10 drink water instead of sugary drinks

Cut calories by drinking water or unsweetened beverages. Soda, energy drinks, and sports drinks are a major source of added sugar, and calories, in American diets.



Why We CAN Exercise

There are many commonly held myths about exercise that make it seem harder than it has to be. Overcoming obstacles to exercise starts with separating fact from fiction. Place a checkmark next to any of the following statements if you have ever thought or said them.

FICTION

- “I don’t have enough time to exercise.”
- “Exercise is too difficult and painful.”
- “I’m too tired to exercise.”
- “I’m too old to start exercising.”
- “I’m too fat.”
- “My health isn’t good enough.”
- “Exercise is boring.”
- “I’m not athletic.”

We hear you! But here are the facts.

FACTS

Even short, low-impact intervals of exercise can be a powerful way to supercharge your health. If you have time for a 15-minute walk (with or without the dog!) your body will thank you in many ways.

Consider “no pain, no gain” the old-fashioned way of thinking about exercise. Exercise doesn’t have to hurt to be incredibly effective. You don’t have to push yourself to the limit to get results. You can build your strength and fitness by scrubbing floors, vacuuming, walking, swimming, or going up and down stairs.

Regular exercise is a powerful pick-me-up that can significantly reduce fatigue (feeling tired) and make you feel much more energetic. If you’re feeling tired, try taking a fast walk or dancing to your favorite music and see how much better you feel afterwards

It’s never too late to start building your strength and physical fitness, even if you’re a senior or a self-confessed couch potato. Exercise is a proven treatment for many diseases—from diabetes to arthritis. Very few health or weight problems make exercise totally out of the question. Talk to a health care provider about a safe routine for you. Many health care insurance plans—including many Medicaid plans—cover case management services to help you manage health issues such as diabetes. Contact your insurance provider to see if a visit will be fully or partially covered.



Hot Tip

Sure, pounding on a treadmill for an hour may not be everyone’s idea of a good time. But not all exercise has to be boring or cost money; just about everyone can find a physical activity they enjoy. “Exergames” are activity-based video games that are played standing up and moving around—yoga or dancing and pretend skateboarding, soccer, or tennis, for example. But you don’t need an Xbox or Wii to mimic the moves, just an imagination! Exergames can burn at least as many calories as walking on a treadmill; sometimes substantially more.



Chapter 2

Getting to Know Partners Well

Chapter 1 focused on the need for individuals to take responsibility for and care of their own mental and physical health because individual health is interconnected with relationship health. Chapters 2 through 6 each describe different aspects of the relationship, again with a focus on individual responsibility and its interconnectedness to the relationship. Chapter 2, *Getting to Know Partners Well*, highlights key areas (Areas Worth Knowing) and processes (Building Intimacy) through which couples learn about each other's expectations and build the depth of their relationship over time.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize key topics that strong couples should discuss and work through together.
- Understand how self-disclosure and partner responsiveness—when mutual—strengthen a relationship.
- Learn strategies to teach and encourage others to get to know their partners well.

Key Concept

How well does an individual *really* know his or her romantic partner? Though a seemingly simple question, it has important implications for maintaining a safe, satisfying, long-lasting relationship. Knowing one's partner well, like so many of the other qualities that enhance a relationship, begins by knowing oneself well. It then involves a mutual understanding of each other and complete comfort with exchanging personal information, without fear of how the information will be shared or used.

During the dating stages of a relationship, exchanging knowledge with one's potential partner permits individuals to explore how well-matched they are and how honest they are with each other. It also helps individuals determine whether a potential partner is able or willing to reach a place of shared meaning. If exchanging information does not become more comfortable over time, is not equitable (i.e., is imbalanced), or is filled with untruths, those are warning signs of an unhealthy relationship. As a healthy relationship develops, having more in-depth knowledge about one another allows each partner to respond in more supportive, couple-strengthening ways (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001). To sustain a healthy and satisfying relationship, an individual must develop and maintain an awareness and deeper understanding of his or her partner over time. The basic principles of and process through which that happens also apply to growing and maintaining healthy parent-child relationships.

Areas Worth Knowing

Although individuals may never know every detail about their partners, there are certain areas that research has shown to be important for healthy relationship functioning.

- **Family Background.** Experiences in upbringing strongly influence adults' current attitudes and behaviors. For example, parents' socialization of their child (i.e., teaching relationship skills such as conflict resolution and communication) can positively influence the child's romantic relationship patterns as an adult (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). These experiences often provide a "blueprint" or "schema" that individuals have for how relationships work.

- **Core Values and Beliefs.** Individuals' personal standards and philosophies for how they want to live their lives, which are framed by influences such as cultural and religious background, community norms and values, and values and beliefs of significant people in an individual's life, are shown to impact marital satisfaction and relationship quality (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010).
- **Relationship Expectations.** Beliefs about how intimate partners behave and what roles each partner should play in a relationship, ranging from how much time should be spent alone together to deeper matters such as commitment, having children, and parenting styles, may change over the course of a relationship, and they do not *all* have to match. However, expectations that are unstated, unreasonable, or unmet can cause conflict in relationships.
- **Previous Relationship Patterns.** Prior patterns often repeat in present relationships. Previous relationships also shape relationship expectations. For this reason, it's important to pay attention to how a partner describes past partners and to know about the relationship dynamics. If a potential partner has had unhealthy patterns in the past, including use of violence or control or repeatedly assuming *rescuer* or *victim* roles, and the partner is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their *own patterns*, it's a warning sign that the pattern is likely to repeat itself.
- **Lifestyle Choices.** Spending and debt habits, priorities, and hopes and plans for the future can bring couples together when they are similar or create problems for couples when there are significant differences. Unhealthy lifestyle choices that impair individual functioning (e.g., substance dependence, gambling) also impair relationship functioning.
- **Compatibility.** The degree of physical connection and social and spiritual similarity between two individuals also matters. On average, couples who are more similar and those that have complementary personalities tend to experience more relationship satisfaction. For example, one study showed that in couples who did not have compatible leisure activities, the wife had lower marital satisfaction (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002).

Getting to know your partner well

- Discuss each other's thoughts, feelings, and day-to-day activities.
- Take time to exchange information with each other in each of the Areas Worth Knowing.
- Express sincere interest in one another through words and actions.
- Encourage understanding through self-disclosure and partner responsiveness.
- Understand and be sensitive to each other's needs and communication styles.

SAFETY FLAG

- **Taking responsibility for one's own behaviors and choices is a healthy indicator.**
- **Not sharing past relationship experiences, criminal or family history, or other areas worth knowing may be a protective measure that breaks down as couples build trust over time. Continued refusal to share any personal history or frequent deception regarding history indicates that the person may not be ready or willing to build a healthy relationship with the partner.**
- **Taking responsibility for a partner's unhealthy or abusive behaviors, such as the partner's excessive drinking, constant put-downs, or frequent yelling about the children's behavior, are signs of an unhealthy and potentially dangerous relationship.**

- **Conflict Management.**¹ How individuals approach and attempt to resolve issues that they encounter impacts the quality of the relationship. Conflict occurs in all relationships. Couples who have similarly healthy conflict management skills such as focusing on the positives, adopting a willingness to accept influence, accepting differences, and using forgiveness (see Chapter 6) can create long-lasting, healthy relationships (Gottman, 1998; Gottman, & Levenson, 1992, 2002; Gottman, & Silver, 1999; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Those who are not able to successfully manage conflict are more likely to end their relationships or experience more serious conflict, including violence (Russell-Chapin, Chapin, & Sattler, 2001). Escalating or persistent use of power, force, control, or violence to resolve issues is a sign of a potentially dangerous relationship.

Building Intimacy

Building true intimacy in a relationship is more than physical or emotional attraction. Relationship intimacy can be defined in different ways depending on the context. After comparing more than 60 definitions in scholarly literature, Moss and Schwebel (1993) found the following three key drivers for intimacy in an enduring, romantic relationship: (1) level of commitment; (2) positive thoughts, feelings, and physical closeness; and (3) reciprocity or mutual exchange.

The first two of these drivers are discussed in Chapter 3 (Nurturing the Relationship). The third driver—reciprocity—refers to a mutual, two-part process of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness that must be present within a relationship (Harvey & Omarzu, 1999).

- **Self-disclosure** in a healthy relationship includes sharing one's personal needs, feelings, desires, and previous life events. Self-disclosure should occur naturally over the course of the relationship.
- **Partner responsiveness** is how the partner acts or responds during self-disclosure. Positive partner responsiveness, or turning toward one's partner, occurs when the partner is engaged and displays care and concern. Negative partner responsiveness occurs when the partner acts disinterested or is critical or judgmental. Negative responses can hinder future attempts at self-disclosure; positive responses promote continued sharing and growth.

Building intimacy is critical, and is especially helpful for reducing the tension when a partner says or does something that seems negative. The stronger the intimacy in a relationship, the better an individual can tell whether a difference in expectations or beliefs is out of the norm or is a standing pattern that needs to be addressed. Couples can build intimacy over the course of their relationships through a routine pattern of self-disclosure and positive partner responsiveness in give and take by both partners.

Couples also must respect this intimacy and not share personal information with people outside the relationship without the knowledge and consent of the partner. Violating a partner's trust and inappropriately sharing information can undermine intimacy and lead to conflict.

These same basic principles of sharing and responsiveness apply to healthy parent-child relationships as early as the preschool years (Gokhan & Crossman, 2012). As children blossom from toddlers to teenagers and young adults and test their independence along the way, a relationship that incorporates purposeful sharing (I feel..., I like..., I need..., etc.) and responsiveness (I hear..., I understand..., I agree..., I can help by..., etc.) helps both the parent and child release inevitable tensions. It is helpful to purposely devote time to sharing and responsiveness and also to focus consistently on the children's positive qualities to put those tantrums and "testing the waters" behaviors into perspective. This also provides the child with a solid foundation for building intimacy in a future healthy relationship.

¹ Chapter 6 is devoted to describing healthy skills for managing the conflict that is inevitable in any relationship.

Summary

Truly knowing one's partner represents an ongoing process that takes time and effort. The process involves building intimacy through healthy interaction—mutual exchanges of information and understanding across multiple areas, including key areas like family background, lifestyle choices, core values and beliefs, and relationship expectations and patterns. A healthy relationship in which two partners are committed to continuous growth creates a positive environment that allows partners to work more productively, provide more stability for children, and have overall better health. The same basic process of mutual sharing and responsiveness strengthens not only couple relationships but also parent-child relationships, reducing stress, and increasing understanding of one another over time.



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Chapter 2 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Healthy couples get to know each other well and strengthen the depth of their relationship over time through an ongoing, balanced process of mutual sharing and responsiveness that covers key areas such as family backgrounds, core values and beliefs, relationship expectations and patterns, and conflict management styles.



Chapter 2 Conversation Starters

For areas worth knowing:

- How did you manage your money in your past relationships? Is that the same or different from how you manage money when you're on your own? How did your partner manage money in past relationships? What's the same (or different) in this relationship? How can you manage to share with [your partner] what you just told me?

For building intimacy (self-disclosure & responsiveness):

- What is it like when you are able to take time and just share your day with [your partner or your children]? When that happens, where does it usually happen? If you were able to spend just 10% more time each day [in that place or chatting together], what would that look like?

For building intimacy (self-disclosure & responsiveness):

- Who is your closest friend? How long have you known [him/her]? If you tell [him/her] something personal about yourself, like a goal you dream about or problem you're having, how does [he/she] respond? How do you usually respond if [he/she] tells you something personal like that?

Qualities That Matter in Our Relationship

(For use with individuals, couples, or groups)

The following table is intended to assist individuals in thinking through various relationship components and determine for themselves how important specific issues are to them in their relationship. Once completed, the chart can be used to facilitate a discussion between couples as they determine the most important components to them as a couple.

QUALITIES THAT MATTER IN OUR RELATIONSHIP

What relationship qualities matter most to you? On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “Not at All Important” and 5 being “Extremely Important,” rank each item in the following list.

	Not at All Important 1	2	Somewhat Important 3	4	Extremely Important 5
Talking openly with each other					
Having a similar upbringing					
Planning how to spend money together					
Disciplining children the same way					
Having fun together					
Being 100% committed to each other					
Sharing household chores					
Trusting each other completely					
Having similar spiritual/religious views					
Sharing life goals					
Being physically affectionate (hugging, kissing, holding hands)					
Being honest all the time					
Having a strong friendship					
Interacting with extended family					
Respecting each other					
Practicing cultural traditions together					
Emotionally supporting each other					
Managing disagreements					
Accepting each other completely					

After you have ranked each item, look back at the list and circle the three qualities that are most important to you. Are they the same or different for your partner? If different, can you agree on three that are important to both of you? List those three most important qualities below and identify ways you and your partner can make these a priority in your relationship every day.

1. Quality: _____

I can: _____

Together we can: _____

2. Quality: _____

I can: _____

Together we can: _____

3. Quality: _____

I can: _____

Together we can: _____



Love Maps – 20 Questions² (For use with couples or families)

This activity is designed to encourage communication and sharing between couples or families. Have individuals answer the questions below about themselves and their partners.

LOVE MAPS – 20 QUESTIONS

Answer the questions below, and then answer the same questions about your partner. Compare answers with your partner. How well do you already know each other? What new things did you learn about each other? Parents and children can get to know each other better by answering some of these questions, too!

Questions about You

1. What is your favorite hobby or way to relax?
2. What is your favorite food?
3. Where do you like to go when you need space to think?
4. What is your favorite ice cream flavor?
5. What is something you are currently worried about?
6. Who is your best friend?
7. Do you prefer dinner out or dinner at home?
8. What is your favorite sport? Have you played the sport?
9. Where did you live when you were growing up?
10. What relative or kin did you feel closest to as a child?
11. If you had a nickname as a child, what was it?
12. Are you a morning person or a night person?
13. If you could go anywhere, where would you go?
14. What is your favorite childhood memory?
15. Do you prefer hugs, gifts, or when your partner says, “Thank you?”
16. What is your favorite TV show? Favorite movie?
17. What song reminds you of your relationship?
18. What is your favorite memory of a date, activity, or moment you and your partner shared?

Questions about Your Partner

1. What is your partner’s favorite hobby or way to relax?
2. What is your partner’s favorite food?
3. Where does your partner like to go when he/she needs space to think?
4. What is your partner’s favorite ice cream flavor?
5. What is something your partner is currently worried about?
6. Who is your partner’s best friend?
7. Does your partner prefer dinner out or dinner at home?
8. What is your partner’s favorite sport? Has he or she every played it?
9. Where did your partner live when he or she was growing up?

² Adapted from Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

10. What relative or kin did your partner feel closest to as a child?
11. If your partner had a nickname as a child, what was it?
12. Is your partner a morning person or a night person?
13. If your partner could go anywhere, where would he or she go?
14. What is your partner's favorite childhood memory?
15. Does your partner prefer hugs, gifts, or to hear "Thank you?"
16. What is your partner's favorite TV show? Favorite movie?
17. What song reminds your partner of your relationship?
18. What is your partner's favorite memory of a date, activity, or moment you and your partner shared?



Simple Ways for Parents and Caregivers to Encourage Responsiveness and Experience Sharing³

(For use with very young or autistic children)

- Encourage non-verbal communication (e.g., eye gazing, pointing, physical positioning, and proximity) for the child to get access to items that are out of reach but in the area or room.
- Use declarations more often than open questions to seek information. For example, instead of “What day is it?” say “Yesterday was Tuesday, I wonder what day it is today.”
- Use facial expressions and gestures to show approval (smile and nod head) or disapproval (frown and shake head).
- Make frequent efforts for joint attention to share interest through pointing, gazing, or showing (exaggerated affect to build anticipation and to sustain/extend joint interactions of interest).
- Use more wait time and pause strategically during interactions with children. For example, pause and give an expectant look or other body language to show you expect a response.
- Offer face-to-face and turn-taking games to promote eye contact, share feeling/emotions through expressions and body language, and guide understanding of and intentions with actions.
- Engage in playful obstruction. For example, playfully get in the way of a child, for the purpose of facilitating a social interaction.



³ Adapted from Maher, M. E. (2012). *Promoting Social Responsiveness with Primary Caregivers and Young Children with Autism*. Sydney, Australia: University of Sydney. Retrieved from <http://www.parentscouncil.nsw.edu.au/announcements/promoting-social-responsiveness-within-a-developmental-relationship-based-approach-with-primary-care>



The 10 P's

If you are single and thinking about dating or if you are dating someone and trying to decide if this person is right for you, it is important to learn about their relationship expectations, core values and beliefs, past relationship experiences, and family background. Each of these issues might impact your relationship. There is no “right” way to get to know each other better, but the following questions can give you some direction. For each of the “P’s,” think about the questions and compare with how you would answer about yourself. You can discuss feelings and answers with your partner unless you think it would be unsafe to do so.

PERSONALITY

Relationships are easier to maintain when personalities are compatible (not the same but similar).

- Does your partner tend to be talkative or more reserved and quiet?
- Does your partner prefer being around people or being alone?
- Does your partner generally trust others or look for fault?
- Does your partner forgive and forget easily or hold grudges?
- Is your partner more often happy/content or depressed/irritable/blue?
- Does your partner make decisions about situations based on feelings or facts?
- Is your partner open to new experiences or more comfortable sticking with things that are familiar?

PASSIONS

Couples should have some passions in common and should feel comfortable with each other's passions.

- What does your partner like to do in his or her spare time or to relieve stress?
- Is your partner religious or spiritual? Are your partner's religious or spiritual beliefs similar to yours?
- What makes your partner experience strong emotions?
- How does your partner handle differences in your beliefs or passions?

PLANS AND PRIORITIES

Commitment is strengthened when a couple has shared dreams and priorities.

- What does your partner dream of having or achieving?
- How does your partner prioritize when deciding how to spend money?
- When your partner envisions his or her future home, what is it like? Who's there?
- What are your partner's financial goals? (e.g., pay off debt, open a savings account)
- What have you always wanted to do or where have you dreamed of going?

PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES

You might not like to think about your partner with someone else but most people have had more than one romantic partner. Patterns in past relationships often repeat themselves in future ones so it's important to know about past relationship experiences.

- How long did your partner's previous relationships last? How and why did they end?
- How were differences or disagreements handled? If there was yelling, hitting, accusing, or put-downs, was that true in more than one relationship or just a particular relationship?

PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Adults using healthy relationship skills show empathy, compassion, and understanding. They do not easily become angry if the partner has a different opinion.

- Does your partner frequently become hurt or angry when you disagree with his or her ideas?
- When you disagree, does your partner talk and compromise or does he or she need to “win?”
- Does your partner seem sincerely sorry if he or she hurts your feelings?
- Does your partner consistently tell the truth?

PROBLEM SOLVING

Conflict is present in all relationships—even in healthy ones. Couples should manage conflict and solve problems in ways that work for both partners.

- Can your partner put his or her thoughts and feelings into words?
- Does your partner show you respect, even during conflict?
- When you say how you feel, does your partner listen and accept that you are feeling that way?
- Does your partner value your opinion?

PAST FAMILY EXPERIENCES

You have probably heard the saying, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” While that’s not always true, we are also shaped by our upbringing and experiences. Our family upbringing is one of the most powerful influences in our lives.

- What was the mood usually like in your partner’s childhood home?
- How was affection shown?
- How did parents or caregivers handle conflict?
- What type of discipline did your partner’s parents or caregivers use? Does your partner want to use similar techniques?
- How were decisions made in your partner’s family? How was money handled?

PHYSICAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

Taking care of one’s physical and mental health is a sign of self-respect. Good health practices also carry over to relationships.

- Does your partner smoke, drink a lot, or use illegal drugs (including use of medication without a prescription)?
- Does your partner have healthy eating habits? Does he or she exercise regularly?
- Is there a history of health problems or unhealthy habits in your partner’s family?
- Does your partner have any sexually transmitted infections?
- When your partner experiences stress, does he or she cope in healthy ways?

PARENTING EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH

Similarities in desire for a family, size of family, and parenting styles also impact relationship quality.

- If you have children, how does your partner interact with them?
- If you do not have children, do you and your partner both want them? What kind of a parent would your partner be toward your children?
- If your partner has other children, is your partner affectionate with them? Does your partner set and enforce reasonable limits?
- Have you seen your partner interact with other children?

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH

Compatibility also is based on having similar values about work ethic and education or vocational skills.

- Does your partner currently have a steady job? If not, is your partner actively seeking a steady job or skills or experience to get a steady job?
- How much education or special training does your partner have? How much education or training does he or she want to have?
- What are your partner's beliefs about responsibility for providing for his or her own needs? What about responsibility for meeting the needs of children in the home? What about responsibility for meeting the needs of any (other) children he or she has?
- Is your partner's job likely to change in the next year? 5 years? 10 years?
- Does your partner work hard at things you believe are important?





Key Topics for Couples⁴

Most couples spend a lot of time together before they make a marital commitment to each other. Many think they know everything there is to know about each other; yet, most couples find out more new things about each other as each year passes. Discovering new things is part of the joy of marriage but there are four main topics people should know about their partners *before* marriage.

RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

We all have expectations about what relationships and marriages should be like. Having similar expectations at the start predicts future happiness and stability in relationships and marriage. Before you commit to each other as a couple, talk about where you want to live, how you and your partner will make and spend money, and whether you want kids, along with any other topics like religion or family traditions that are important to one or both of you.

CORE VALUES AND BELIEFS

It is important to know each other's core values and beliefs. What are the most important things to you in life? What are your beliefs on hot-button issues like politics, abortion, divorce, religion, money management, and parenting? If these beliefs are different, it does not necessarily mean you need to end a relationship but it could lead to more arguments (now or later). It's best to work out a plan together for how you will manage those differences.

MONEY

It is important to talk about expectations about making, spending, and saving money. Share facts with each other about current debts, spending habits, and obligations like supporting children outside your relationship or tithing (religious contribution). Discuss ways to manage your money as a team. Money is one of the most common sources of conflict in marriage, and making a plan early can help you avoid trouble later.

HEALTH

Knowing about health issues or possible issues early can also save you difficulty down the road. Share any ongoing health issues with your partner, including sexually transmitted diseases, as well as major health problems that run in your family. This helps you plan for what your future of caring for one another will look like and helps you prepare together if there are red flags for the health of any children you might have.

No couple can discuss every possible issue before they marry. And it would be nearly impossible to know absolutely everything about each other, even after many years together. You will continue to learn new things about each other as the years go by if you make it a habit to be honest and open. With these habits you will be better able to find what you have in common and handle your differences in the years to come.

⁴ Adapted from Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Tip Sheet #05-11.



Tweens, Teens, and Intimacy: Tips for Parents and Caregivers⁵

Parents and caregivers who model intimacy and knowledge-building with their partners can use those same skills to strengthen their relationships with their tweens and teens and guide them on both the promises and pitfalls of dating. Tips include:

- Build or maintain a caring, supportive relationship with your youth by establishing sharing rituals—daily, weekly, or monthly times to share feelings and personal information with each other. Parents can share family background, cultural or religious traditions, personal beliefs, or values. Listen and demonstrate understanding when the youth shares. That sharing relationship serves as a model for the relationships your youth will have with friends and future romantic partners.
- Provide educational opportunities for your youth to learn about the biological, social, and emotional changes taking place during pre-adolescence and adolescence. Youth are interested in knowing about maturity (growth spurts and male/female biological differences) and enjoy applying this information to real life.
- Take time to find out about and know your youth's friends. This is a great way to learn about the youth's peer support network, their strengths and interests, and their lifestyle choices.
- Ask your teen tentative, open-ended questions about potential romantic interests. Avoid forcing the issue or making judgmental comments. Keep personal information between the two of you unless your youth gives explicit permission to share it with someone else.
- As appropriate, be open to discussing your own relationship experiences with your youth. Share how you define healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Join your youth in watching his or her favorite media (TV programs, YouTube videos, movies, etc.), particularly those that involve youth having romantic relationships. Wait until after it ends and use what you saw to talk with your youth. For example ask, "How might that situation really end up?" or, "How do you think you would have handled that situation?"
- Be prepared to support your teen's efforts to date, unless there appears to be a threat of psychological or physical harm. In that case, your teen needs to know that you will intervene. Share your worries; let your teen take primary responsibility for setting reasonable "rules of the road," and write the rules down together.

Overall, it's important to: 1) provide a safe and secure base for your youth to communicate with you openly about his or her relationships; 2) use open-ended questions that guide your youth in thinking about his or her values and relationship expectations; and 3) share meaningful time together to exchange feelings and experiences about your own relationships.



⁵ Adapted from *Teens and Dating: Tips for Parents and Professionals*, Kate Fogarty, University of Florida Cooperative Extension.



Dating Guidance for Single Parents

- **Give yourself time.** After separation, divorce, or the death of a loved one, it takes time to cope with the loss and move on to other relationships. For some it takes one or two years to resolve these feelings and be ready to pursue new relationships. As relationships end, individuals need time to form new identities separate from the one established as a couple. Avoid seeking a new partner just to make you feel whole again. Before pursuing new relationships, one should work independently on emotional growth and establish personal goals.
- **Validate children's emotions.** Like adults, children experience a range of emotions when they observe parents' or caretakers' relationships end. They may feel sad, afraid, hurt, or confused. Encourage children to express their feelings and share that you understand their concerns. Tell them often that you will always love them and will continue to be there for them, and show them with affection or interaction. If you have a ritual of spending certain times with your children, keep that time special just for them.
- **Start new relationships cautiously.** When a single parent starts dating someone new, he or she is often excited and looks forward to introducing his or her children to the new partner. However, there are some important tips to keep in mind:
 - Limit children's contact with new partners until you have had time to get to know the partner's expectations, values, beliefs, and background, and feel certain the relationship has a future.
 - Introducing children to new partners too early or too often leaves them vulnerable to becoming attached to someone who might not be around very long.
 - When a new relationship ends, it can be as painful for children as their parents' separation or divorce.
 - Be patient. When a parent starts dating, children often become jealous. They may seek more attention than usual and interrupt conversations. It will take time for your children to adjust to your new partner.
 - Understand the children's worries. Children want to protect their parents from feeling hurt. They may worry that if they like one parent's new partner, then they are being disloyal to the other parent. Let them know their feelings are normal.
 - Be sure your partner is someone you trust to be around your children. Learn about their family background, prior relationships that resulted in children, and interactions with other children first.
 - When you eventually do invite your new partner over, maintain children's routines. Even something as small as letting them sit in their usual seats at the dinner table will help them feel more comfortable.
- **Plan initial introductions.** Plan an informal outing or activity—one where everybody can relax, be themselves, and have a good time. Activities like walking around the block or neighborhood together, getting ice cream together, or going bowling allow time for everyone to meet but do not require lengthy conversations. After the initial meeting, encourage your children to talk about the experience—what went well, what did not, what they thought about your partner. Listen without being defensive.
- **Limit affection and demonstrations of sexuality.** Children may feel uncomfortable seeing a parent be affectionate with a new partner. Teens in particular may feel jealous, confused, or angry if they are trying to deal with their own sexuality as well as the parents'. It is better to keep displays of affection and sexual activity for times when children are not around.
- **Balance dating needs with children's needs.** Try to schedule dates on nights when your children will be staying with their other parent or at someone else's house. Spend time with your children before and after your date to help assure them your new partner is not taking you away from them. Be sure your actions meet your words; if you tell your children you will be home at a certain time, then be sure to be home on time.



Getting to Know You Again: Relationships after Separation

Transitioning back home after an extended absence such as a military deployment, extended hospital stay, or prison term can be challenging. When you have a partner or children, you have the added difficulty of re-establishing relationships after spending time living apart and having different daily experiences.

FOUR TIPS TO HELP SMOOTH THE TRANSITION:

1. Make a list of desirable qualities about yourself and a list of qualities you like in your partner. This can be anything— “I don’t smoke” or “I love my kids.” Ask your partner to do the same thing. Share the qualities with each other. Post them on the wall or fridge and choose one to remind your partner of daily. Positive words and actions are important for children to see, too.
2. Be open and honest with your partner. Sharing personal details and experiences is a way to make a healthy relationship stronger, but how much you share and how soon you share should be based on what feels comfortable to you. While sharing intimate details with children may not be appropriate, being open and honest with them in what you do share is still important.
3. Discuss roles and responsibilities with your partner. Talk about changes in household routines and discuss how your return to the family affects those routines. Come to an understanding of each parent’s role and clarify these roles to the children to help them adjust as well.
4. Be prepared to listen and show care for your partner’s feelings and expectations through the transition—even when those expectations are different from yours—so you can learn or re-learn about each other without guessing wrong about what your partner is thinking or feeling. The same tip applies to your children. Listen and show care for their feelings, acknowledge their expectations, and be honest about your ability to meet those expectations.



Chapter 3

Nurturing the Relationship

Chapter 2 highlighted key areas and processes through which couples learn about each other's expectations and build the depth of their relationship over time. Chapters 3 through 7 build on those themes for couples who have found mutually compatible expectations. This chapter focuses on nurturing the relationship—devoting time and energy to strengthening the relationship while balancing other demands.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the significance of quality communication in nurturing intimate relationships.
- Be able to identify strategies for nurturing relationships.
- Learn strategies for teaching the importance of nurturing relationships.

Key Concept

Nurturing the relationship refers to caring processes—intentionally engaging in positive interactions, demonstrating commitment, and envisioning a healthy relationship future. Healthy relationships require deliberate actions by both people (i.e., choices) that promote the well-being of the relationship. Those deliberate actions have great returns on investment; adults in healthy relationships have lower rates of absenteeism and job turnover, fewer accidents, and higher levels of productivity (Cornwell & Rupert, 1997; Gray & Vanderhart, 2000; Markman, Myrick, & Pregulman, 2006). Not only are adults in healthy marriages better employees, they tend to be more engaged in their communities. They volunteer more of their time, are more likely to be homeowners, and are more financially stable (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007; Lupton & Smith, 2002; Schoeni, 1995; Waite, 1995). Adults in positive committed relationships also tend to be better off physically, socially, and emotionally. On average, married adults are healthier, live longer, and experience lower levels of stress and mental health issues (Bookwala, 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Waite, 1995). By proactively and intentionally making choices that strengthen the relationship, individuals can maintain it, improve it, and protect the relationship from stressors and negative thought patterns.

Nurturing a relationship generally can be shown by:

- Making time for one another and spending time together as a couple (see also Chapter 5). This may mean having a trusted friend or family member provide occasional child care to allow for couple time without the children.
- Reducing or giving up unhealthy behaviors or unwanted activities that harm the relationship.
- Staying focused on the partner's strengths and positive qualities rather than allowing the inevitably irksome habits to dominate the focus.
- Saying and doing things that align and signal to one's partner that the relationship is a priority (e.g., not spending time with someone who the partner perceives to be a threat to the relationship).

- Setting limits or forgoing self-interests to meet the needs and desires of one's partner. For example, a person who enjoys staying at home to watch TV for "alone time" and whose partner values visiting family may forgo some TV or alone time for the partner (and vice versa). Note that this is different from forgoing power in the imbalance of power and control associated with domestic violence. A relationship is unhealthy when sacrifice is unbalanced or demanded, or where guilt-inducing statements like "If you really loved me you would..." are used in order to have one's way.

Positive Interactions

Strengths-Based

All individuals have strengths. When partners consistently focus on the strengths and positive qualities of each other and the relationship, they are more likely to be happy and satisfied with the relationship (Gottman, 1994; Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003). For example, when a partner does something disappointing or frustrating, a spouse who has consistently thought and talked about the positive things they see in their partner will more easily be able to put the action into positive context and assume that the partner was not purposely trying to be hurtful or frustrating. Consistently positive thoughts also make forgiveness easier (see Chapter 6). In turn, when the partner is forgiven by the spouse, the partner logs that as a positive quality rather than a negative reaction or overreaction.

Unhealthy couples engage in the opposite pattern, consistently focusing on negative aspects of the partner and feeding negative interactions. Sharing these negative thoughts can further damage the relationship by encouraging friends and family to think negatively of the partner as well. Not surprisingly, people are more satisfied with relationships when their partners view them positively; they are less satisfied when their partners view them negatively (Gottman, 1994 ; Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003).

This also is true for co-parenting relationships where the parents are not a couple. Focusing on the positive aspects of the other parent can make the relationship less stressful for both parents and the children involved.

Partners 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). Both partners in a relationship commit to establishing continual patterns of positive interactions and developing supportive exchanges of affection and intimacy.

Heard and Understood

Inherent to these interactions are good communication skills. Communication is central to our interactions with others. Both positive and negative communication patterns can be shared via verbal and non-verbal cues. Good communication requires being skilled at both sending and receiving messages because there is a dynamic exchange—both partners alternate roles. This allows an exchange of information rather than one-way delivery. It is important for partners to feel as though they are not only heard but also *understood*. Understanding comes about through acknowledgment and validation of an individual's feelings or message. In contrast, a lack of understanding may come about when one partner is sharing feelings or perceived needs and the other attempts to give advice, talk about their own experiences, or dismisses the partner.

See and Say Strengths

- Choose to think and tell others about your partner's strengths rather than their weaknesses.
- Do the same with the relationship; think about what is going well rather than focusing on the negative aspects.
- Recall positive times you and your partner have shared and find ways to (re) create good experiences together.

For example, if a husband tells his wife that he really needs to find a better job, and the wife says, “I know, I’m tired of my boss yelling at me,” that’s an okay start but not an end to the conversation. The wife has *heard* that her husband wants a better job but not *understood* her husband’s meaning in bringing it up because she has redirected the conversation to her own self-interests. By contrast, if the wife asks her husband open-ended questions regarding his thought behind the comment, like “what might make for a better job” or “what made you say that,” she opens the conversation for solutions and lets the husband know that he was understood (even if there’s no immediate solution). No one communicates perfectly. However, consistently positive interactions over time build up to protect partners and their perceptions of the relationship when one partner’s skills falter at any given moment.

Demonstrating Commitment

Commitment is an essential ingredient for developing and maintaining healthy relationships. Higher levels of commitment are associated with many positive relationship outcomes, including greater relationship satisfaction, quality, trust between partners, and positive responses to a partner’s negative behaviors (Givertz & Segrin, 2005). Being committed represents having a sense of *us with a future*. With commitment, there is a high degree of couple *one-ness* in which individuals come to view themselves as one unit, are more focused on joint interests than self-interests, and are willing to work together so that the relationship continues (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Commitment in a relationship exists both through dedication and constraints. *Dedication* is demonstrated when individuals intentionally try to improve the relationship. Ways that individuals demonstrate dedication include maintaining fidelity and making and sticking to promises about the future of the relationship. *Constraints* are forces that lead individuals to feel like they have to or should remain in a relationship. They typically go unrecognized until thoughts to leave the relationship surface. Examples of constraints include social pressure, investments of time and resources, living together, and having children together. Overall, demonstrating

Relationships and Communication

Effective communication is central to all our relationships—at home, at work, in the community. The following tips are worth sharing:

- Focus on a person’s strengths and interests, not problems.
- Communicate with others; do not talk at or to them.
- Notice non-verbal cues—yours and theirs.
- Make eye contact, unless it’s culturally inappropriate.
- Show understanding by what you say and what you do.



How can I show my partner I am committed to the relationship?

- **Make time for the relationship.** Given everyone’s busy schedule, making time for your relationship must be intentional. Try to set aside time each day to connect with each other. Cooking breakfast or dinner together is an example of a way to fit “couple time” into a busy or stress-filled day. Separate activities and interests are healthy but only if they are balanced with couple time, too.
- **Spend time together without distractions.** Protect your relationship by spending time together without life’s distractions like watching television, using the phone or computer, or hanging out (online or in person) with others outside your relationship. The amount of “together” time may be different for each couple or each individual, so talk with each other about your need and best times for couple time.
- **Build traditions.** Notice things you do together that build connection, and do more of them. For example, make a point to sit down over a meal and talk about the highs and lows of the day. Make Friday night date night each week, even if your “date” is sitting next to each other on the front stoop, porch, or curb. Have your own traditions for a special holiday, such as preparing a favorite food together, visiting a favorite person or place, sharing what you’re thankful for, or exchanging a small gift with each other. Hug, squeeze hands, kiss, or rub noses with each other every time you pass by the place where you first met.

commitment involves keeping the “big picture” in mind (i.e., having a happy, healthy family) and identifying strategies that will sustain healthy relationships despite challenges along the way.

Envisioning a Healthy Relationship Future

Couples also can make their relationship a priority by envisioning a healthy future together. Couples in healthy, satisfying relationships create *shared meaning* together; in other words, they perform rituals, roles, and tasks that provide a foundation for their continuing relationship (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Shared meaning becomes a positive quality of the relationship. In addition, healthy couples make statements and align their actions to tell partners that the relationship has a future (e.g., signing both names to a lease agreement or setting a shared goal for the future such as buying a car and working out ways to reach that goal). A strong predictor of relationship satisfaction is the extent to which one partner’s assurances exceeds the other’s expectations (Dainton, 2000). Stating assurances, talking about the future, and creating shared meaning help couples demonstrate that their relationship is a lifelong priority.

Envision a healthy future together

- **Talk and plan together about what your future as a couple looks like.**
- **Assure your partner that you want to spend the rest of your life with him or her.**
- **Set new and exciting goals each year for your future together.**

Summary

Partners who are nurturing the relationship (1) consistently engage in positive interactions; (2) demonstrate commitment to the relationship; and (3) envision a future together. The choices that individuals make regarding a relationship set the path for the relationship. This can positively or negatively impact other's beliefs and influences on the relationship along with satisfaction outside of the relationship, such as at work. Building positive communication skills not only enhances a couple's relationship but also is essential for obtaining and sustaining employment. People in unhealthy marital and couple relationships may begin to suffer physically or mentally and experience work loss or have difficulty caring for themselves or their children.

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Chapter 3 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: When couples nurture their relationships through consistently positive communication and demonstrated long-term commitment to one another, they experience greater relationship satisfaction that contributes to better health and increased work productivity.



Chapter 3 Conversation Starters

For positive interactions:

- What are some of the good things about [partner's name] that you like or admire?
- What does [partner] do or say when you feel like [he/she] is being helpful or caring? What else [pause and give time to think]? What else [pause...]?

For demonstrating commitment - reducing unhealthy or unwanted behaviors or actions:

- Can you tell me about a time when you managed not to [do the unwanted behavior e.g., slap child as discipline]? On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being absolutely confident and 1 being not at all confident, how confident are you that you could manage that again?

For envisioning a healthy future together:

- What is something you are both looking forward to together? How about a year from now? How about five years from now? What does that look like? How will you make it happen together?

Building Our Relationship**(For use with individuals, couples, and groups)**

The following activity is designed to help individuals identify and build on the strengths in their relationships. Ask them to look at the list of items and check the ones that occur in their relationships.

BUILDING OUR RELATIONSHIP

Look at the following list of items and check off the items that happen in your relationship. After you complete your list, share with your partner or the group the items that are the biggest strengths in your relationship.

If you are sharing with your partner, how similar is his or her list? Discuss what you think is a strength. For example, what does each person in the couple do (or not do) that tells them they “help each other” or “like each other and let each other know it?” Now, think about an area of your relationship or lives together where you are not as strong. Decide how you can use your strengths to build your relationship in that area.

In my relationship:

- We put time into our relationship.
- We know that the other person’s needs are important.
- We help each other.
- We like each other and let each other know it.
- We are nice to each other.
- We do things that we know the other person will enjoy.
- We are loyal to each other.
- We are honest with each other.
- We like to spend time together.
- We make choices together.

I would like to be stronger at: _____

To do better, I will: _____

Demonstrating Commitment **(For use with individuals, couples, and groups)**

The following activity is designed to help recognize and strengthen relationship commitment. Ask individuals to reflect and make notes on the questions. Then they can share their answers.

DEMONSTRATING COMMITMENT

Reflect and make notes on the following questions. If you and your partner are doing this activity together, share your answers.

- A. List some ways you let your partner know you are committed to your relationship. If you do not consider yourself to be in a relationship right now, list some ways you have shown commitment in a past relationship.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

- B. How does (or did) your partner show commitment?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

- C. Think about a couple you admire. How do they show commitment to each other?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

- D. List some things you could start doing or saying more to let your partner know you are committed to your relationship.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Your Top Five**(For use with individuals or couples in a group setting)**

The following activity is designed to help those who have learned key relationship aspects and skills to process and apply information related to how they select potential partners.

YOUR TOP FIVE

Make a list of the top five qualities that attract you to another person.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Share your ideas if you are comfortable doing so. Talk about those qualities and why they are attractive. Discuss whether the ideas are healthy or potentially unhealthy.

For example, being attracted to someone because of their looks may be a reason to start a relationship but is not something that demonstrates commitment or care for another person. Focusing on looks without considering qualities like affection, respect, and friendship can keep you in an unhealthy relationship. However, looks can be related to keeping physically and mentally healthy, which is a key component of a healthy relationship.

Now, think about the qualities that most attract you **and** show commitment to a partner. For example, you might admire a positive attitude, which helps a person think positively about a partner and relationship. Use the space below to list five such qualities:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Listen-Hear**(For use with individuals and couples in a group setting)**

The following activity is designed to demonstrate the importance of effective two-way communication.

Have couple participants work together. Have individual participants pair off.

Give one participant a copy of the directions. Give the partner a blank sheet of paper. Have the participant and partner sit back to back (in chairs or on pillows on the floor). Ask the participant with the directions to read them one by one to his or her partner, pausing after each one to give the partner time to do what it says. There are two rules: **no peeking and no questions**.

*Alternate directions: Give both participants blank sheets of paper, have them sit back to back or close their eyes, and have both follow the directions as you read them aloud. There are two rules: **no peeking and no questions**.

**LISTEN-HEAR**

Read each of these instructions to your partner. Pause after each one to give your partner time to do what it says.

1. Fold your sheet of paper in half. (Pause)
2. Now, tear off the upper right-hand corner. (Pause)
3. Fold the paper in half again and tear off the upper left-hand corner of the sheet. (Pause)
4. Fold it in half again. (Pause)
5. Now tear off the lower right-hand corner of the sheet. (Pause)

DEBRIEF: Invite participants to face each other or open their eyes again. Ask them to unfold the paper. Did the paper come out the way both partners thought it would? Do all the sheets look the same? What caused differences? What could have helped to make the sheets match more exactly (e.g., two-way instead of one-way communication, ability to ask questions, ability to have visual cues)?

Discuss the need for effective, two-way communication at home, at work, and in the community. Ask a couple or family to work together to create a couple or family definition of “Good Communication.” What makes someone a good “sender” (person giving and explaining information)? What makes someone a good “receiver” (person listening and understanding the information)? What else helps create shared meaning and understanding?

Demonstrating Commitment

(For use with individuals, couples, or groups)

This activity is designed to help individuals think through what it is they love and appreciate about their partner or family member and then use that information to affirm and strengthen the relationship. Tell participants to complete the thoughts about their partners.

DEMONSTRATING COMMITMENT

Complete the following thoughts about your partner.

1. Two things I really appreciate about you are...

2. Two things you do that are really romantic are...

3. One thing I really miss about you when you are gone is...

4. What I look forward to most when coming home to you is...

Verbal expressions of love and commitment are important to every relationship. Telling a partner or family member specific things that you love or appreciate about them is a simple way of letting them know you do notice and appreciate them and the things they do in support of your relationship.

Share with your partner. Commit to telling each other one thing each day that you appreciated about them, missed while they were gone, or were looking forward to most when coming home.

Our Ground Rules¹**(For use with individuals, couples, or families)**

The following activity is designed to help individuals think through what is acceptable or unacceptable to them as it relates to how they are treated in a relationship. Once individual rules are identified, couples or families can discuss creating a set of rules that are acceptable to everyone.

OUR GROUND RULES

We all have spoken and unspoken rules or expectations about our relationships. Examples include rules or expectations about how partners will treat each other, how they will resolve problems, and what types of information they will or will not share with others. Some might say they agree to disagree on certain issues; others might say they never yell or hit. Think about your individual ground rules then work on the following activity together.

List the 10 most important ground rules you have in your relationship:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Share your rules with your partner or other family members. Discuss why these rules are important to you, then work together to develop a set of rules everyone can agree to. Post your ground rules somewhere in your home(s) so you have a constant reminder of them.

¹ Adapted from Penn State Cooperative Extension. (2004). Goals analysis. *Connecting families: Planning for success*.

What Does Non-Verbal Communication LOOK Like?²

(For use with individuals and couples)

Requires advance preparation

This activity is designed to highlight the importance of non-verbal communication in conveying messages. The human face is extremely expressive, able to convey countless emotions without saying a word. And unlike some forms of non-verbal communication, facial expressions are universal. The facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust are the same across cultures.

There are many creative ways to complete this activity. Here are a few suggestions:

- Write each of the following words on an index card (or print and cut out the words). Fold each card and place into a bowl, hat, or bag. Have participants pick a word and attempt to act it out.
- Write words on sticky notes or sentence strips and place around the room. Act out the emotion and see if participants can guess and move to the right one.
- Say the word out loud and have participants draw what this emotion looks like to them. Share with the group.
- Find pictures that represent each emotion. Participants can match the picture to the word.



Afraid	Confused	Frustrated	Lonely	Sad	Stressed
Angry	Content	Happy	Offended	Scared	Surprised
Anxious	Curious	Interested	Overwhelmed	Shocked	Thankful
Bored	Excited	Jealous	Proud	Shy	Worried

² Adapted from *Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success*.

Verbal Expression of Feelings–Warm Fuzzies and Cold Pricklies³ (For use with individuals and couples in a group setting)

This activity requires advance preparation. You will need: a fuzzy ball or pom-pom and a foam ball with toothpicks sticking out.

This activity uses the sense of touch to help couples associate their actions with their partners' feelings.

Show the participants a fuzzy ball or large pom-pom. Explain that it's a "warm fuzzy," and it reminds us how we feel inside whenever someone says something or does something that makes us feel good. Ask the participants to name some warm fuzzies or things their partners do or say that make them feel good, happy, or warm inside.

Then, show them a "cold prickly" (e.g., a small foam ball with toothpicks sticking out of it). Explain that a cold prickly reminds us how we feel whenever someone says something that is mean or hurts our feelings. Ask participants to name some cold pricklies or things that their partners say or do that make them feel badly.

Warm Fuzzy Practice Game (this is especially good for a workshop or family where participants have come to know each other): Have the participants sit in a circle. Remind them of some good examples of warm fuzzies (I love when you cook dinner, you're funny, I like to spend time with you, you're a good friend, etc.). Explain that in relationships, we want to practice giving warm fuzzies and stay away from cold pricklies.

VARIATION 1: Start the game by tossing the "warm fuzzy" (fuzzy ball or large pom-pom) to an individual and say something nice to him or her. That individual should then toss the ball to another participant and say something good or positive about him/her. That participant then tosses it to someone else.

VARIATION 2: Start the game by giving each couple a "warm fuzzy" (ball or pom-pom). Encourage the couples to toss the warm fuzzy back and forth, saying good or positive things about the partner each time.



³ Adapted from <http://www.vahealth.org/Injury/sexualviolence/documents/2008/pdf/FRC1.pdf>

Shared Decision-Making

Each of us makes many decisions throughout the day—what to wear, what to eat, and what time to go to bed. Most of these choices do not require input from others. But bigger decisions—moving, quitting a job, and starting or ending a relationship—can be more difficult because they have longer lasting effects and often involve other people.

If you are in a relationship, it is important to talk about these bigger decisions together. Couples who have successful relationships share in decision-making. They talk about pros and cons of each option, discuss each partner's preferences, and consider how choices will impact the relationship and also other family members. For example: Where will you live? How many children will you have? How will you discipline your children? Who will do what chores? How will money be handled?

When decisions are made together or compromises are reached, partners are less likely to resent each other for making the wrong choice. Neither partner has to feel like they were “wrong” if things do not work out as planned. And when things do go as planned, partners feel pride in accomplishing the task together. There are times when it makes sense for one partner to “be in charge” of certain decisions. For example, one might be better at managing money or one might have more knowledge about auto repairs. These arrangements can work as long as partners agree and feel like it makes sense for them.

If you have children, think about how the choices you make will affect your children. Ask for children's input on simple decisions from time to time. When making bigger decisions ask about their thoughts and concerns. Discuss their concerns even if the final decision is one that may not be popular such as moving to another city for work. When children are included in family decision-making, it gives them a feeling of importance and also helps them learn important lessons about everyday decision-making.





Low and No-Cost Date Ideas

MAKE A PICNIC

- If you want to take your date or partner out to eat, consider putting together a picnic. Bring some sandwich makings or snacks like animal crackers, fruit, or cheese and crackers, and you've got yourself a date. Don't forget a couple of drinks and a blanket, towel, or sheet. Head to a park, a grassy area, or even your backyard or front stoop. Now you can enjoy the outdoors, your date, and a bite to eat.

MAKE IT A DAYTIME DATE

- Lunch at restaurants usually costs less than dinner. Many urban restaurants offer half-priced appetizers during certain times as well. Some movie theaters have cheaper prices during the early afternoon. This is another way to go out but spend less money.

TAKE A NATURE WALK OR HIKE

- Many areas have state or local parks with walking or hiking trails. Parks make a fun, active date, and most have free or low-cost entry fees.

VISIT A MUSEUM OR HISTORICAL PLACE

- Many local museums and historical places charge a low-cost entry fee or request a donation only. Visit one that interests you as a couple and spend a day talking about the new things you see or learn.

A DAY AT THE POOL OR BEACH

- During the summer, many areas have a public pool, lake, or beach that is low-cost and provides hours of fun in the sun.

VISIT A LOCAL BOTANICAL GARDEN OR NATURE PARK

- Many nature parks are free of charge and provide hours of "couple" time in nature.

HOMEMADE DINNER

- Work out an exchange with another couple to watch each other's children so each couple has a date night. Turn off some lights, light some candles, put a sheet over the table and turn on your imaginations to make a home-cooked meal together feel like a fancy restaurant. Try a new recipe or make something that both of you like but the children don't normally eat.

GAME NIGHT OR MOVIE NIGHT AT HOME

- Play card, board, or dice games together (check yard sales for cheap board games). For a double date, invite another couple over to join game night. You also can rent a movie and cuddle in the comfort of your home.

A CONCERT, TOURNAMENT, OR OTHER COMMUNITY EVENT

- Look for flyers, signs, or radio or newspaper ads about free or low-cost events in your area, and go to one of those together. If you have internet access, look at your town's website for event dates and times.

VOLUNTEER TOGETHER

- Many non-profit organizations rely on volunteers. Look for opportunities in your community to support an organization you both care about.
- Volunteering at a fundraiser for your favorite charity can give the two of you a chance to dress up and attend a fancy event for free.



Chapter 4

Showing Affection and Respect

Chapter 3 focused on nurturing the relationship—devoting time and energy to strengthening the relationship while balancing other demands. Chapter 4 describes strengths-based processes that can further enhance partners' ability to demonstrate affection towards each other.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how types and amounts of affection can be perceived differently by different people.
- Recognize how self-respect links to respect in relationships.
- Learn strategies for teaching others ways to enhance affection and respect in their relationships.

Key Concept

Showing affection and respect for a partner are ongoing parts of a healthy relationship. Great starts to a relationship are just that—great starts—and not guarantees of continued greatness. Showing affection and respect, like the strategies to maintain mental well-being described in Chapter 1, are no-cost supports that strengthen and maintain intimate relationships. Those no-cost relationship supports in turn lead to healthier, more stable families.

SAFETY FLAG

Service providers have a window of opportunity to reach potential domestic violence and child maltreatment victims. Making routine inquiries about safety in the home through validated assessment tools or questions can contribute to prevention. Even if a victim chooses not to disclose abuse or maltreatment, the service provider's inquiry can communicate support and increase the likelihood of future disclosure (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2004).

Showing Affection

Physical affection (e.g., hugging, kissing on lips, holding hands, massaging) is highly correlated with intimate relationship satisfaction (Gulledge, Gulledge, & Stahmann, 2003). That said, physical affection is only part of how partners can show affection. Moreover, individuals' backgrounds and personal preferences influence what they perceive as affection. Affection is not a one-size-fits-all.

When one partner crosses physical affection boundaries the other partner may feel at fault. But pursuing unwanted physical affection is never okay.

Emotional Support for Partner

Demonstrating high levels of emotional support during stressful or frustrating times (not just when deaths or other traumas occur), such as listening to the partner's concerns, being sensitive and compassionate, and maintaining a cooperative posture, can both create and sustain healthy romantic relationships. Partners who display emotionally supportive behaviors to one another report greater relationship satisfaction over time, especially when dealing with stressful situations (Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003). Emotional support can be physical hugs, helping out more around the house, or spending time listening without distractions while the partner shares frustrations. The best form of emotional support will vary depending on the individual's preferences and situation, and it's best to encourage partners to share their needs and desires with each other.

Love Languages

How individuals express love and perceive love is not universal. Family history, cultural, gender, and ethnic differences lead individuals to have different expectations and acceptable norms for marriage and intimate relationships. Throughout a relationship, nurturing actions need to occur in ways that align with a partner's preferences. For this to occur it is necessary to know one's partner and understand how he or she feels loved. Showing affection and appreciation in ways that are meaningful to one's partner can help strengthen relationships. Couples must develop their own "language of love" so that they can share love in meaningful ways.

When people show love, they often do things that they themselves would like as opposed to loving their partner in a way that their partner feels loved. But if their primary love language differs from their partner's, then the partner might not recognize it as an expression of love.¹

Showing Respect

Dictionary.com defines the word respect as "esteem for or a sense of the worth or excellence of a person, a personal quality or ability, or something considered as a manifestation of a personal quality or ability." Many people use the word *respect*, but describing what that looks like in a relationship can be challenging. Respect for oneself is a critical first step. There is evidence that people with low self-esteem underestimate their partner's love and caring for them; people with high self-esteem accurately estimate or overestimate their partner's love, which in turn leads to higher relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a).

Cultivating Positivity

When individuals think more positively about their partners, seeing past minor flaws and focusing on the person's positive traits or aspects, they experience more relationship satisfaction. In part, this is why the idealization of a person at the beginning of the relationship makes the relationship *feel* strong. However, over time partners lose that idealistic notion of each other, tend to view one another more accurately, and need other relationship assets to keep the relationship going strongly (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b). Additionally, low self-esteem individuals tend to think their partners view them less positively whereas high self-esteem individuals tend to overestimate the amount of positivity in their partners' views of them. When individuals feel like they are viewed more positively by their partners, they in turn view their partners positively (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b).

Cultivating positivity—both through thoughts and in actions—is an important contributor to the well-being of a relationship. Happy and healthy couples engage in mutual positive perceptions and interactions, which make both more likely to recur (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). In other words, when each partner focuses on the other's strengths and praises the other for them, the relationship is stronger, too. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Dr. Stephen Covey uses the concept of an "emotional bank account" to explain how interactions within a relationship are either strengthened or damaged through the things people

Find Out Which of Chapman's Five Love Languages Your Partner Identifies with Most

- **Words of Affirmation.** "I feel most loved when my partner uses kind words and compliments to tell me how much I am valued and appreciated."
- **Quality Time.** "I feel most loved when my partner gives me full attention and I am able to spend alone time with my partner."
- **Receiving Gifts.** "I feel most loved when my partner gives me gifts."
- **Acts of Service.** "I feel most loved when my partner does things for me, such as cooking dinner, doing laundry, cleaning, and taking care of the car."
- **Personal Touch.** "I feel most loved when my partner shows his/her feelings through physical contact such as holding hands, kissing, hugging, or sex."

¹ Adapted from Chapman, G. (1995). *The five love languages*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing.

say and do. This applies to all relationships including those among couples, co-parents, and parents-children. Using this concept of an emotional bank account, individuals can make “deposits” to the account by saying and doing kind, positive things for the relationship. “Withdrawals” also may be made by making negative statements, using put-downs, violating trust, or engaging in unhealthy conflict.

Couples who make regular deposits to their partner’s accounts, for example in the forms of kindness, respect, and acceptance, have enough “funds” in the account to spare. Thus, when minor conflict occurs and withdrawals are made, the overall quality of the relationship is maintained. When couples don’t have enough positivity invested in the relationship account, even little bursts of negativity can drain the account and severely damage a relationship.

Similarly, research has shown that happy, satisfied couples in stable relationships have the tendency to show many more positives than negatives toward one another (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). When happy couples engage in neutral, everyday interactions, like having dinner together or picking the kids up from school, they show 20+ positives (e.g., warmth, affection, validation, interest) for every one negative (e.g., criticism, defensiveness, anger) (Kim, Capaldi, & Crosby, 2007). Even when generally happy couples have a fight they have a tendency to show five positives for every one negative. Therefore, it is important to help couples strengthen their ability to focus on their partners’ positive traits and overlook non-harmful flaws—keep their partners’ emotional bank accounts full—in order to sustain satisfying, healthy relationships. Couples can cultivate positivity of both past and present experiences with their partner:



- **Positives from the past.** In healthy relationships, partners recount early parts of the relationship with laughter, smiles, and nostalgia; in unhappy relationships, partners recount the bad memories from early parts of the relationship (Gottman, 1994). Individuals can learn how to notice and memorialize positive experiences in their relationships. For example, having pictures around from happy moments can help individuals remember positive times and how their partners contributed to those experiences.
- **Positives in the present.** An individual can draw the conclusion that a partner’s actions were done with good or bad intentions. There may always be things that individuals don’t necessarily like about their partners, but there are two keys to positivity in the present: (1) focusing on the traits that the individual likes in his or her partner and (2) focusing on all the good things the partner has said or done. When the partner does something the individual does not like, try to avoid assumptions that the partner has bad intentions or is being purposely hurtful.

Summary

Showing affection and respect are two ways that couples can continuously strengthen their relationship. Showing affection includes both physical affection and emotional support. Showing respect begins with oneself—focusing on one’s own positive qualities and strengths. It extends to focusing on one’s partner’s strengths and positive qualities and sharing those views with one another. An individual’s expressions of affection for a partner should be based on learning and responding to that partner’s particular likes, needs, and desires since those are framed by many environmental and cultural influences.



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Chapter 4 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Two key ways to continuously strengthen an intimate relationship are showing mutual affection and showing respect in ways that respond to a partner's likes, needs, and desires, which are framed by many environmental and cultural influences.



Chapter 4 Conversation Starters

Showing affection, physical:

- What's feels most like affection—for you—when you think of things like kissing on the lips or cheek, hand-holding, or gazing into each other's eyes? How often would you say you and [partner's name] do that? How could you increase the times you do that by, say, 10%? What about [partner's name]? Do you know what he/she likes best [If no - What's a time today that you can ask?]. [If yes - How often do you two do that? How could you increase that by 10%?]

Showing affection, emotional support:

- Your situation must be really tough for you and [your partner]. What's something—anything from hugs to housework—that you do or could do that you know makes [your partner] feel supported right now? How do you know that makes them feel supported? What would that look like if you did that just a little bit more this week? And what would be best for your partner to be doing to support you?

Respect, self-esteem:

- Tell me something that you really like about yourself (if unchangeable physical feature, next ask for something that's not about looks so it relates to changeable behavior). How do you feel when [you're doing/experiencing that]? What does your relationship feel like when you are able to do/feel/experience more of that?

What Makes Your Heart Sing?

(For use with couples in group settings)

This activity is designed to encourage couples to demonstrate love and appreciation for each other.

You will need: Colored paper, scissors, colored markers, stickers, or other materials for decorating.

1. Have participants draw a picture of a heart or provide a heart cut-out or drawing. Have individuals write down what makes their heart “sing”—what a partner does or could do that is a sign of affection to them. Encourage them to put as many ways as possible and to decorate the heart as well!
2. Have each participant share and discuss, with his or her partner only, what makes his or her own heart sing. In a group setting, ask for volunteers to share one new thing they learned about themselves or their partners.

Creating “Care Jars”

(For use with couples in group settings)

This activity is designed to offer ideas on showing care to your partner.

Materials needed:

- 2 empty containers such as jars or bowls.
- 2 notepads of different colored paper or 2 pens with different colored ink.

Provide these directions to the couple (also works for parent-child), substituting their names for

the sample names in the directions: Use one color of paper or ink per person for everything you write in this exercise, and choose different colors from each other. Label one of your containers “How Mary showed love today,” and label the other container “How Max showed love today.” Mary, throughout the day, write down the ways you show love for Max and place them in the first container. Also write down the ways Max shows love for you, and place these in the second container. Max, do the same thing. Write down all the ways you show love for Mary and put them in her container, and write down all the ways Mary shows love for you and put them in your container.

At the end of the day, you and your partner can read all of the notes together. Take turns reading what you did for your partner, and what your partner did for you.

Leave these directions for the end of the day: Talk about the notes you both wrote. Did you write down the same things? There might be some things that you did to show love but your partner didn’t notice or think about the same way. There might also be some things that your partner did to show love for you that you didn’t notice or think about the same way. This is okay! Use this time to express your appreciation for the loving things your partner did—both what you noticed and what you didn’t notice.

Explain the following to participants: This exercise is about showing care, not competition. Do not compare the *number* of things you and your partner do. Use this as a tool any time to remind yourself of the ways you each can and do show care and appreciation for each other.

Relationship (Emotional) Bank Account (For use with couples)

This activity is designed to teach couples how to use the emotional bank account concept as a way of becoming aware of how interactions impact a relationship and making intentional efforts to improve positive interactions.

1. Encourage participants to sit down with their partners and individually write down the things their partners did in the last week that they considered “deposits.” This can be anything—a hug or kiss, using a pet name, cleaning the house, planning dates, sharing intimate feelings without being asked, picking up the partner’s favorite treat, or cuddling on the couch. Have participants share their lists with each other.
2. Let participants know that each list is the beginning of the “relationship bank account.” Encourage participants to list deposits and withdrawals over the next week, next month, and next year. Tell them to have fun with it and assign dollar values, if they’d like. Cuddling might be worth \$5 and cleaning the house \$50. Ask participants to post the list somewhere obvious, like the front door or refrigerator.
3. Each week, ask them to assess their accounts. Do they have more deposits or withdrawals? What about their partners? Was anyone “overdrawn”—having made more withdrawals than deposits? Encourage them to discuss how it feels to see their account balances.

Example:

Emotional Bank Account	
Deposits	Withdrawals



Celebrating the Positive

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, WHAT DO YOU DO?

When we have bad or unexpected experiences, it is easy to dwell on the negatives and think only about other bad things that might follow. As a result, things seem to get continually worse. However, if we focus on the good, then we value those experiences even more. The way we approach positives and negatives in life can affect how we view our partners. If we focus on the negative and find fault in situations, we are more likely to focus on problems in our relationships. Showing fondness, sharing happy memories, and expressing appreciation can help ease troubled feelings and nurture positive feelings.



HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE QUALITIES IN YOUR PARTNER THAT YOU LIKE OR ADMIRE?

Take some time every day to think about your partner's good qualities. When you have some rough times, thinking about all of the good times you have shared and the qualities you like and admire can make it easier to overlook the small things or realize when rough times are temporary. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt. Focus on your strengths, your partner's strengths, and the good you both contribute to the relationship.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU TELL YOUR PARTNER YOU APPRECIATE HIM OR HER?

Thinking about the characteristics you admire is the first step. *Telling* your partner is even more important. Over time, many couples stop expressing appreciation for each other. While it is easy to feel caught up in daily hassles, too tired, or too busy to connect, expressing appreciation daily is a quick, simple way to let your partner know how much you value him or her.

CREATE MEMORIES AND REMINDERS OF POSITIVE MOMENTS.

Display pictures of happy occasions—whether vacation photos and mementos or photos of you and your partner just having fun together at home. These types of reminders can go a long way in helping you remember the good times and support you have in your partner when things are not going so well. Talk about and cherish fond memories and look forward to fun things you have planned in the future.



P.S. I Love You - Dealing with Time Apart

Many couples experience time apart, whether it is frequent short trips, weekly commuting, caring for a terminally ill relative, or extended military deployments or activation. It is natural for the stress of separation and changes in daily routines to stir up emotions. The feelings that arise from these separations range from anger, a sense of abandonment and powerlessness, to loneliness or anxiety. Individuals differ in how they react and what type of emotional support they need from their partner to withstand separation. Also, lack of communication when the spouse is in a remote military location or unable to communicate for another reason with those at home can further increase anxiety and stress levels.

Realizing that time away is a necessary part of the job and not the fault of the spouse is an important step in coping. Following are other helpful coping strategies.²

- **Respect** – Mutual respect—for oneself and one’s partner—is essential. Understanding that both partners contribute to family success even when one’s career or other obligations take him or her away is vital. Freely say “thank you” to your spouse for what he or she does and accept “thanks” to demonstrate mutual respect and caring.
- **Flexibility** – Quality time together as a family is critical for relationship bonding. How and where your family spends its time together or connects is not nearly as important as the togetherness itself and positivity. Use phone, mail, Skype®, or FaceTime®, and other ways to communicate back and forth as much as possible. Use the time to tell each other at least one positive thing about yourself, which can help re-assure your partner that you are staying healthy and keeping a positive outlook.
- **Redirecting Energy** – For the stay-at-home spouse, channeling energy into productive efforts such as volunteering or pursuing further education can be helpful. Giving your time and concern to someone else can often make personal problems or stressors seem smaller.
- **Keep Children Involved** – Children react to the stress of the parent who is at home, so try to continue the children’s routine as much as possible. Having a routine at home can also help the parent ease into the separation. Find activities that you and your children enjoy doing together to help unite the family during the other parent’s absence. Use an upbeat voice to talk about the spouse not at home, and use photos, voice messages, clothing, or mementos to remind your children of fun or meaningful times to help them stay connected to the parent who is away.
- **Support System** – Outside support is essential. It can come from spouses in a similar situation, friends, family, or your faith community. Never be afraid to ask for help, especially from those who have been through similar situations. Decrease isolation by involving family in outside circles such as a play group, book club, or volunteer activities.

Next time one partner is expecting to be away for a while, plan ahead by:

- Discussing any major decisions that may arise during the time apart.
- Discussing expectations and realities for ways and times to communicate.
- Obtaining a general power of attorney so the spouse at home will have authority to handle any financial, tax, legal, medical, or other important matters that must be taken care of while the other spouse is away. A general power of attorney also is useful in the event the other spouse becomes injured or wounded.

While you are separated:

- Keep a list or a calendar to write down both positive events and issues that come up so you can share them with your spouse.
- Unless it is an emergency, make major decisions together.

² Adapted from Home and Away Series by Hill, M. (1998). Ohio State University Extension, HYG-5194-98. <http://ohioline.osu.edu/lines/fami.html#homeaway>



Chapter 5

Developing and Maintaining Friendship

Chapter 3 highlighted key areas for partners to know about one another and strategies to continuously develop intimacy. Chapter 4 described strengths-based processes to further enhance partners' ability to demonstrate care towards each other. In this chapter, the focus is on the friendship—mutual trust, support, influence, rituals, and goals—that must underlie intimate relationships.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize qualities that underlie both successful friendships and successful work environments.
- Describe relationship practices that contribute to couple identity.
- Prepare to help others build or strengthen friendship in an intimate relationship.

Key Concept

Friendship is distinct from peer or partner acceptance. It is made up of the same core ingredients that make many work environments thrive—mutual trust and support, sharing and resolving issues together, and accepting influence from one another. In an intimate relationship, these core ingredients help couples create a strong couple identity. In a work environment, the core ingredients help an organization or business establish and maintain a strong ethos or sense of good moral character. Couples strengthen their sense of friendship over time by building and sustaining couple routines and rituals. These routines and rituals serve as meaningful time together and foster couple identity.

SAFETY FLAG

“He lets me know what’s wrong with me all the time and he tells me he loves me anyway, is a form of emotional abuse, not the sign of a relationship built on friendship. In middle and high schools, youth often focus on peer acceptance—group popularity or social status—and mistake it for the intimacy of friendship. Similarly, individuals can mistake physical attraction combined with a partner’s statements of acceptance as a perceived relationship foundation rather than building the mutual support, trust, and influence that comes from friendship and makes a solid foundation for a relationship.”

Couple Identity

Feelings of romance or passion may grow or diminish at different times throughout a relationship. Having a strong friendship as the foundation of a relationship provides couples with an enduring and stable base over time, regardless of the waxing and waning of romance, stresses, and routine days. Friendship can be developed and maintained in a variety of ways, such as engaging in common interests and activities together and being supportive of one another (Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001).

For couples, focusing on joint interests and dreams also can foster an increased sense of couple identity. In forming a couple identity, two partners establish who they are as a couple and what defines their relationship. In addition, each individual develops a strong sense of “one-ness”—thinking about what is best for *us* and not merely *me*. In other words, individuals’ sense of identity goes from *me* to *we*. Couples can foster one-ness by sharing values and goals, engaging in a common purpose, and protecting the relationship from negative influences.

- **Sharing values and goals.** Identifying shared values and goals acts as a unifying force in a relationship; it helps to bind couples together and focus their relationship in a common direction (Helms-Erikson, 2001; Kaplan & Maddux, 2002). Goals that a couple might establish and share include moving in or out of a neighborhood, celebrating a holiday the same way every year, starting a savings plan, or purchasing a new car. Values might include following cultural traditions such as building a sweat lodge or attending midnight Mass at Christmas—value-based practices that they want to pass on to their children.
- **Engaging in common purposes.** Common purposes can provide couples with a mutual sense that they are working together at something larger than themselves. There are many examples of common purpose, such as choosing to have children or become foster parents, choosing to be physically active through running, biking, or another shared activity, choosing to reduce and remove unhealthy habits together like smoking or drug abuse, or choosing to volunteer time to support a cause or religious mission that both believe in. Common purpose builds a couple's identity by deepening the friendship between partners as well as providing opportunities to act on the shared goals held by the couple. These common purposes can relate to items within the couple and/or outside of the couple.
- **Protecting the relationship from negative influences.** For many couples, other people such as extended family or ex-partners can have a powerful influence on relationship quality and stability. Depending on the relationship, these influences may be positive and serve to support and encourage couples. In some cases, these influences can be negative and cause strain on the relationship. Other negative influences for relationships include using “divorce threats” against each other, working too many hours, spending too much time with friends, addiction, and infidelity. A healthy couple relationship is defined not only by what couples do

Maintaining Friendships

- Being supportive
- Spending time together
- Being willing to resolve problems together
- Accepting influence from one another
- Sharing thoughts and feelings
- Trusting each other

SAFETY FLAG

Protecting a Relationship or Controlling It?

In healthy relationships, couples make a shared decision to protect the relationship from negative influences (toxic people, interactions, and habits). Both partners agree that the relationship will be stronger by limiting or eliminating the negative influence. In unhealthy and potentially dangerous relationships, one individual uses power and control to isolate the partner from friends, family, and other influences; the individual sees those influences as a threat to the individual's control or relationship expectations.

Showing One-ness

Partners show one-ness by...

- Setting boundaries for interactions with others.
- Celebrating occasions that are important to each other.
- Flirting only with each other.
- Keeping promises.
- Looking for and remembering the good stuff about each other.
- Speaking positively about each other to other people.

together, but also the limits they place around the relationship. By avoiding certain people, interactions, and influences that bring negativity into the relationship, partners show they are loyal to each other and the relationship, sending a message that their couple oneness is central in their lives (Honeycutt, 1999).

Spending Meaningful Time Together

The daily stressors that individuals experience can impinge on a couple's ability to spend time together doing activities that deepen their mutual trust and intimacy. Couple routines and rituals are relatively simple yet powerful ways to share moments, sustain friendship in the relationship, and foster couple identity.

- *Couple routines* represent recurring activities or daily habits that partners share. For example, a couple may make a point to kiss each other hello. By establishing such routines, partners make sure that they are able to maintain a connection despite other commitments (e.g., being apart from each other when working). These instances help remind partners that they are valued and appreciated, and allow for greater intimacy, trust, and connection in the relationship.
- *Couple rituals* represent more formal ceremonies or occasions that partners celebrate or engage in together on a regular basis. These rituals can be connected to past events in the relationship (e.g., anniversaries), each individual's life (e.g., a promotion or other accomplishment), or national or religious holidays. The observance of meaningful traditions is positively linked with relationship satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001).

When couples have children in the home, their routines and rituals also bring a sense of stability and identity to the household and children's lives. As mentioned in Chapter 1, one important ritual is the family meal. Research shows that youth in families who frequently eat

together are more likely to report a satisfying relationship with their parents, less likely to report high stress levels, and less likely to engage in abuse of tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2012).

Commit to putting in a little extra effort every day to strengthen your relationship!

Here are a few ways you can spend just five extra hours each week connecting:

- **Before leaving:** Do not leave without knowing one interesting thing that will happen in your partner's day. 2 minutes a day X 5 working days = 10 minutes per week.
- **When returning:** Have a 20 minute stress-free conversation. Give full attention. Show support and understanding before giving advice. 20 minutes a day X 5 days = 1 hour 40 minutes per week.
- **Admire and appreciate:** Find some way every day to give or communicate genuine affection and appreciation. Call, text, or email to touch base when you are away from each other. 5 minutes a day X 7 days = 35 minutes per week.
- **Affection:** Use non-verbal cues—cuddle, kiss, and hold hands. Go to bed at the same time even if you do not go to sleep at the same time. Remember to say I love you and kiss each other before going to sleep. 5 minutes a day X 7 days = 35 minutes per week.
- **Alone time:** Devote at least 2 hours a week to uninterrupted time alone together. Avoid talking about who will do what chores or tasks. Spend time catching up, reminisce, talk about your hopes and dreams, and just enjoy your time together. 2 hours per week.¹

¹ Adapted from: Gottman, J., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Summary

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 knowing each other, but about liking, trusting, supporting, and valuing each other. Building and participating in couple and family routines and rituals strengthens couples and families, providing stability and a feeling of belonging. Rather than living alone together, couples and families 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 identity, and spend meaningful time together.



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Chapter 5 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Friendship between couples that includes trust and a deep respect for each other creates a foundation that can help couples work through life's challenges. Couples need to be intentional in their efforts to stay connected through positive interactions and meaningful time together to maintain that foundation of friendship.



Chapter 5 Conversation Starters

- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being absolute acceptance, how much would you say your partner accepts you for who you are? What would you base that on?
- What are some things you both want to see happen in the next month? What makes those things important to both of you?
- What's a typical day look like in your household?
- What are some traditions that you repeat each year—going to bed after midnight for New Year's or celebrating Thanksgiving with a ham or at a Chinese food restaurant?

Couple Teamwork (For use with couples)

This activity is designed to encourage couples to communicate with each other and work in coordination. This activity requires advance preparation. You will need a puzzle or colored blocks and a few pieces of paper.

Give each couple a puzzle or pile of blocks. Give them a set period of time to complete the puzzle or build a tower. While they are completing the task, hand them a piece of paper with a “negative influence” on it. Let them know that it is required that they comply right away with whatever is written on the paper. This could be anything that will disrupt them from their task and make it harder to complete.

Negative influence examples:

- Both partners stand up and touch their toes.
- One partner checks to see if he or she has any text messages.
- One partner comes to talk with the facilitator.
- Both partners stop and count to 20.
- Both partners stop and tell each other what they ate for breakfast.

DE-BRIEF: Have them discuss how the disruption or “negative influence” affected their feelings toward the task and each other. Have them rate their level of frustration with themselves and with their partner while they were doing the task. Discuss whether there were relationship factors that made doing the task less frustrating. For example, was the need to complete the common task helpful when managing the outside influences? Was there non-verbal communication between the couple that made it more or less frustrating?

Couples can also be asked to think through the following questions and remember them to remind each other in the future how they can stand together to protect their relationship from negative influences.

Things that protect our relationship:

How we will strengthen things that protect our relationship:

Are Your Goals Compatible?**(For use with individuals, couples, and groups)**

This activity is designed to help individuals think through their personal goals and then consider how those goals are compatible or aligned with the goals of their partners or potential partners.

While couples often talk about their individual and relationship goals, some may remain unspoken. Both types of goals are easier to reach when partners are aware of them and can support each other in achieving these goals. If you are working with couples, they can fill this out separately and then compare their individual goals and the goals that they have for themselves as a couple. Use these questions to guide couples through a discussion of their answers: How are your goals the same as your partner's? How are they different? How can you and your partner work together to do these things?

For follow-up, ask partners to select a goal together and figure out what steps they need to take to achieve that goal together. Use the following questions to help you think about your goals. Be honest about goals that really matter to you, especially if some involve your partner.

ARE YOUR GOALS COMPATIBLE?

List three things that you want to do or achieve this month:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

List three things that you want to do or achieve with your partner this month:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

List three things that you want to do or achieve in the next five years:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

List three things that you want to do or achieve with your partner in the next five years:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Our Activities to Do (For use with couples or parents)

This activity is designed to help couples or parents identify common activities that they may enjoy doing with their partner or their child. It is also helpful in discussing the idea that individuals may not always like to do the same things and that's okay too!

OUR ACTIVITIES TO DO

What do you like to do together? What are some things one of you likes to do but the other does not enjoy as much? Write down all of your ideas. From time to time when you select an activity, try out something from each other's lists. You might even discover you enjoy this activity.

You can try this activity out with your children, too!

We Both Like To:	I Like To:	My Partner Likes To:
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.
6.	6.	6.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Consider the following seven types of non-verbal signals and cues we often use to communicate our interest in and to others:

1. **Facial expressions:** The human face is extremely expressive, able to convey countless emotions without saying a word. And unlike some forms of non-verbal communication, facial expressions are universal. The facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust are the same across cultures.
2. **Body movements and posture:** Consider how your perceptions of people are affected by the way they sit, walk, stand up, or hold their head. The way you move and carry yourself communicates a lot of information to the world. This type of non-verbal communication includes your posture, bearing, stance, and subtle movements.
3. **Gestures:** We wave, point, plead, and often use our hands when we are arguing or speaking in an animated way. However, the meaning of gestures can be very different across cultures and regions, so it's important to be careful to avoid misinterpretation.
4. **Eye contact:** Since the visual sense is dominant for most people, eye contact is an especially important type of non-verbal communication. The way you look at someone can communicate many things, including interest, affection, hostility, or attraction. Eye contact is also important in maintaining the flow of conversation and for assessing another person's response.
5. **Touch:** We communicate a great deal through touch. Think about the messages given by a firm handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring pat on the back, a patronizing pat on the head, or a controlling grip on your arm.
6. **Space:** Have you ever felt uncomfortable during a conversation because the other person was standing too close and invading your space? We all have a need for physical space, although that need differs depending on the culture, situation, and closeness of the relationship. You can use physical space to communicate many different non-verbal messages, including signals of intimacy, aggression, dominance, or affection.
7. **Voice:** We communicate with our voices, even when we are not using words. Non-verbal speech sounds such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm, and rate are important communication elements. When we speak, other people "read" our voices in addition to listening to our words. These non-verbal speech sounds provide subtle but powerful clues into our true feelings and what we really mean. Think about how tone of voice, for example, can indicate sarcasm, anger, affection, or confidence.



Goal Setting in Relationships'

What are your short and long-term goals? What are your partner's short and long-term goals? How similar are your goals and your partner's goals? How do you support each other in the achievement of individual goals?

What are your partner's and your goals for your marriage or relationship? That is, what do each of you want out of your relationship? What do you want your relationship to look like in the future?

SHARE YOUR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Realize that both partners in a relationship have desires and expectations for themselves and the marriage. According to Dr. David Olson, co-author of *Empowering Couples: Building on Your Strengths*, oftentimes partners are not aware of each others' goals. This can be misinterpreted as a lack of support that can eventually result in conflict. Sitting down together to talk about your goals—and using effective communication to both share and listen—brings the desires in someone's mind to the other person's ears. A good sign of a healthy relationship is a partner who is willing to sit down and both talk about and listen to goals—individual and relationship ones.

WRITE YOUR GOALS AND STEPS TO ACHIEVEMENT

Writing down goals and steps to achieve them gives partners a visual reminder of the goals and ways they can help each other. This can be creative—using an old cardboard box, old sheet, or lots of paper taped together to make one big sheet, along with some crayons or colored markers, draw who and where you are currently, what you want to achieve, and what you need to do individually and together to achieve the goals. Writing down goals also helps individuals and partners identify barriers—things that are currently standing in the way of goals. When writing your goals make them:

- *Specific* – be clear, simple, and specific in what you will do.
- *Realistic* – write about what you can see as possible.
- *Time-bound* – set a specific timeframe to achieve the goal—1 day; 1 month; 6 months; 1 year.

Defining and achieving goals is not always easy. Expect to come across obstacles, delays, and disappointments as you work toward fulfilling your individual and relationship goals. Set aside time on a regular basis (e.g., once a month) to discuss your progress with each other and adjust timeframes or steps needed to keep it realistic. Remember, setting goals in a relationship allows partners to work together for the betterment of their marriage. It allows each partner to know what the other wants so the couple knows the direction that their partner and relationship are heading toward.

¹ Adapted from *Couple Talk: Goal Setting in Marriage* by Cindy Bond Zielinsky. The Marriage Matters Series Newsletter.



Shared Dinner Time²

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends shared dinner times as often as possible as a way to strengthen families and support children's development. There are many ways that shared mealtimes can benefit families.

- Regular shared mealtimes can increase children's sense of belonging and stability.
- Children who share meals with their families on a regular basis tend to eat healthier foods than those who do not. They eat less high-fat, high-sugar prepared and packaged foods and more fruits and vegetables.
- Teenagers who eat frequent meals with their families are less likely to be depressed or use drugs than those who do not. They are also less likely to be violent, have sex, and experience emotional stress. Adolescents who eat meals with their families frequently are likely to be more highly motivated in school and have better peer relationships.



Family mealtimes promote parent-child communication. Experts agree that open communication with parents is important from a child's early months through their teen years. Mealtimes may provide a time and place for in-depth talks, relaxation, and catching up on family news.

Although most families agree it's important, many families find it difficult to have meals together. Here are some of the reasons reported:

- Conflicting schedules (especially important were work schedules and children's activities, particularly as children enter adolescence).
- Lack of commitment by family members to shared mealtimes.
- Interference of television (50% of families in a recent Gallup poll say their families watch television during dinner).
- Food-related problems (lack of cooking skills and differences in food preferences).

While the barriers are challenging, the benefits lead many parents to try to increase the number of meals that they share with their children.

TIPS FOR FAMILY MEALS

- **Make it a family priority to share meals.** Even if a meal is simple, like mac & cheese, make a shared commitment to come together each evening for a meal. If one parent or child can't make it until later in the evening, have a healthy snack so that the meal can be put off until everyone is home. If you can't eat together every evening, start with some evenings or have morning meals together.

² Adapted from *Family Rituals and Traditions*. Kaiser, M., Peeples, G., Ryals, D., Wiley, A., & McClellan, D.

- **Declare shared meals to be “sacred” family time.** Set a beginning and ending time and write it on a shared calendar. Devote the meal to talking and sharing as a family. Don’t allow TV, mobile devices, reading material, or other distractions. If a family member’s job requires them to be on-call, turn the device to vibrate during mealtime.
- **Reduce stress.** The time just before dinner is often challenging, especially if you have young children. You are busy and the little ones are hungry, crabby, and clingy. Make a simple healthy snack part of the routine, such as carrots, pretzels, or applesauce. Have a pre-dinner “activity box” for little ones that includes paper and crayons to draw pictures of daily activities to talk about during the meal.
- **Get everyone involved.** Children are more likely to eat meals that they help plan or prepare. Young children can wash vegetables, tear lettuce and set the table. They can make invitations, place markers and decorations for special meals. Older children can do dishes and may have responsibility (and freedom) to prepare a simple dish or a complete meal for the family. When that happens, it can be the parent’s night to clean up.
- **Encourage relaxed conversation.** Let everyone have a turn talking, and set a “no negative talk” rule. Save work or financial stress talks for couple time, and focus on positive things to share. While table manners and courtesy are important, avoid discipline during mealtime. Try to model good manners and good nutritious eating habits. This is often more effective than nagging during meals.

Chapter 6

Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways

Earlier chapters highlighted building knowledge and intimacy as well as strengths-based processes for partners to demonstrate care toward one another. Chapter 5 focused on the friendship—mutual trust and support, sharing and resolving issues together, and accepting influence from one another—that must underlie intimate relationships. This chapter moves beyond intimacy and friendship to the conflict that is inevitable in any intimate relationship.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize unhealthy interaction patterns between couples.
- Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy personal responsibility.
- Learn strategies for successful conflict management.
- Gain comfort with tools to help others learn successful conflict management.

Key Concept

Conflict arising from individual differences, cultures, backgrounds, and stressors is a normal part of a couple's relationship. Some differences may reflect *solvable* problems—those that can be addressed in some mutually agreed upon way. Other issues may be *perpetual* problems—those that will likely always be present in the relationship. With perpetual problems, conflict may not be easily resolved, but it can be managed (Gottman, 1998). Perpetual problems may reflect differences in core values.

Unhealthy Interaction Patterns

The inability to manage conflict in a healthy way leads to poor relationship quality and relationship break-up (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Four interaction patterns have been identified that indicate a couple is seriously struggling to manage conflict in the relationship and may be headed for divorce or relationship dissolution (Gottman, 1996; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1997):

- Criticism—personal attacks on a partner's character with the intent of making the partner appear wrong.
- Defensiveness—warding off perceived attacks and criticisms by shielding one's self.
- Contempt—attacking a partner's sense of self-worth with the intention to insult them.
- Stonewalling— withdrawing from one's partner in an attempt to avoid conflict.

Exposure to high levels of unmanaged conflict creates an unhealthy environment for children (El Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001). Couples who are violent toward each other are more likely to be violent and abusive toward their children (Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009). Also, children who have experienced high levels of parental conflict tend to have more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (e.g., aggression, depression, lower academic achievement) (El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004). However, Katz, Kramer, & Gottman (1992) stated that exposure to conflict that parents can successfully manage may help children learn conflict management skills. Cummings & Merrilees (2010) demonstrated that when compared with family structure, parental conflict has been found to be a better predictor of child adjustment. Regardless of whether parents are married, separated, or remarried, unresolved marital conflict has a negative effect on child and

adolescent well-being (Cowan & Cowan, 2005). As children observe their parents' interaction, they develop internal working models of family relationships including the attitudes, availability, and responsiveness of others (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Children who have and observe positive family relationships during childhood are more likely to go on to create positive, supportive relationships in adulthood (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Likewise, negative and unsupportive relationships tend to be repeated in future generations. For example, adults who recall their parents having high conflict tend to report lower marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Hatton, Conger, Larsen-Rife, & Ontai, 2010). Parents who have distressed relationships tend to be harsh or disengaged with their children. These children tend to grow up to be irritable and have distressed marriages, and the pattern repeats itself (Cowan & Cowan, 2005). Following are some strategies for successfully managing conflict, including remedies to the interaction patterns mentioned.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Personal Responsibility

Individuals in healthy relationships have a tendency to take some personal responsibility for their own actions or behaviors when issues arise. Rather than deflecting blame and becoming defensive, partners admit their fault to their partners and accept responsibility for their contribution to the issue. Normally, part of accepting one's role is being able to apologize for it. Apologies in a healthy relationship help turn a negative situation into an opportunity for connection and growing. However, accepting responsibility for a partner's actions or behaviors is not an indicator of a healthy relationship, and may be a red flag of serious issues such as intimate partner violence. *Successful conflict management should never entail enduring physical, mental, or emotional abuse of any kind.*

Strategies for successful conflict management include:

- **Using Soft Startups.** How a conflict begins generally predicts the path it will take. A key strategy in managing conflict is the use of soft startups to a discussion. A soft startup involves talking about a difference of opinion or an issue in a way that is sensitive to the partner's perspective. To use a soft startup, describe the concern in a neutral, factual manner (e.g., "I noticed that there are dirty dishes in the sink."). Next, describe how the concern makes you feel as specifically as possible (e.g., "It makes me frustrated when the dishes sit dirty for more than a couple hours."). Finally, state a positive need (e.g., "I'd really like to come up with a system that enables us to get the dishes done sooner."). Soft startups are free from criticism, blame, and contempt, and usually do not elicit defensiveness. Thus, the likelihood of a productive discussion is far greater.
- **Using Calming Techniques.** Unmanaged negative emotions can undermine healthy patterns of couple communication and can lead to poor relationship quality and individual health (Gottman, et al., 1998). Learning to regulate negative emotions during conflict is important for individual and couple well-being. Healthy couples are able to use a variety of self-soothing strategies during heated arguments, such as using humor, taking a time-out, and breathing (Gottman & Silver, 1999).
- **Accepting Influence.** Partners who accept influence from one another—those who listen to one another's advice and are willing to change their ways—report much more effective conflict management (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Accepting influence is a sign of mutual respect. It generally represents power-sharing and joint decision-making. However, in some cultures and belief systems, accepting influence can mean dividing decision-making duties and powers based on cultural norms or traditions, according the partner respect for their role and contributions, and listening to each other's views and needs in private settings. When partners have effective decision-making strategies, they are better able to recognize individual strengths and defer to each other, thereby promoting collaboration and teamwork.
- **Maintaining a Positive Environment.** Maintaining an overall positive environment is beneficial to a relationship. When conflicts arise, couples who think more positively toward one another will reframe such events in a more positive light and handle them more easily and respectfully (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Couples can help to prevent and lessen conflict by creating a culture of positivity—one where partners take time often to notice small tokens of affection and appreciation toward one another. This will help partners recall the positive, even during conflicts.

- **Not Sweating the Small Stuff.** Individuals in healthy relationships develop a basic acceptance or tolerance for partners' personalities and preferences (Gottman, 1998). Some differences in opinion, taste, and belief will likely be present throughout a relationship. Learning to manage, and not necessarily resolve, minor differences in likes and dislikes is important for relationship quality.
- **Forgiveness.** Forgiveness—letting go of resentment or grudges—is a longer term strategy; it is an effective way to improve one's own mental and physical health. It is not the same as accepting someone's actions as permissible. That is, one can forgive without excusing the partner's actions or behavior and without having to allow future hurtful behavior. Forgiveness is a process that begins by reflecting on a situation, one's own reaction, and the effect of both on one's own health and well-being. When a person is ready, it moves to letting go of anger, bitterness, resentment, or other negative feelings and releasing the control the person or situation has had on one's life (Mayo Clinic, 2011). Forgiveness is linked to commitment, effective conflict resolution, and higher relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). It is also linked to lower blood pressure, reduced stress, and lower risk of substance abuse (Mayo Clinic, 2011).



Emotional and Physical Safety

Personal safety—represented by the absence of fear of physical or emotional violence in a relationship—is a foundational component of a healthy, stable relationship (Stanley, 2004). An immediate danger sign for any relationship is individuals who are unable to manage conflict without personal safety or if one or both individuals is being threatened. Managing couple or marital conflict in a healthy way never requires the use of force, threats, or harm. While healthy marriage and relationship skills can be integrated as a preventive strategy to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors in family dynamics, it is not a safety intervention. All stakeholders should have protocols and processes in place for referring individuals and families in danger to more immediate assistance.

SAFETY FLAG

The main message for individuals and families: Conflict in a relationship is normal; it's how people deal with it that makes a health difference. The same healthy relationship strategies can be used across couple relationships, parent-child relationships, and work relationships.

Summary

The aim in stable, satisfying relationships is not the elimination of all conflict, but rather its effective management. The strategies in this chapter represent various methods couples can use to help manage conflict. Rather than causing a divide between the couple, by employing these processes, couples can strengthen healthy relationship skills further, recognize unhealthy conflict management, and choose strategies to grow closer together. If one partner is either not willing or not ready to change unhealthy patterns, the other partner may choose the path of forgiveness to break out of the unhealthy relationship in a healthy way.



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Chapter 6 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Conflict arises in all relationships. In healthy intimate relationships, couples take responsibility for their own behaviors and actions. There is a healthy exchange of ideas and overall positive environment that helps couples manage, and not necessarily resolve, all of their differences.



Chapter 6 Conversation Starters

- When you get frustrated with [partner's or child's name], what do you do well? What do you wish you did better?
- What happens when someone in your family gets frustrated with you?
- How do you handle conflict between your children?
- What is a hard choice that you have had to make recently as a family? How did you go about making the decision(s)?

Three Houses

(For use with individuals, couples, or families)

This activity is designed to facilitate discussion about issues that may be positively or negatively affecting families. It can be used with both children and adults.

Have individuals draw three simple houses on a sheet of paper and label them:

1. House of Good Things
2. House of Worries
3. House of Wishes

Tell them to write or draw things that fit into each house; then reflect on the following:

1. Reflect on the House of Good Things—strengths in your family.
2. Reflect on the House of Worries and ask yourself if there are worries that you have control over. Give yourself time to think this through. If the answer is yes, make a list of things you think you can do. How are your strengths helpful to you? If you do not have any control over a worry, practice letting go. Stressing over things you cannot change doesn't help and can be bad for your health.
3. Reflect on your House of Wishes. If your wishes were to come true tomorrow, what would be different? What would change? What are steps you can take to begin to work toward that change? Who is someone you trust that you can talk with about your wishes?

Managing a Frustration¹**(For use with individuals, couples, and families)**

This is a simple activity to help individuals begin to shift their thinking from a negative frustration to positive solution, and take responsibility for the parts they can change.

MANAGING A FRUSTRATION

Read and complete each of the following statements:

1. Something in my life or relationship that makes me feel frustrated is:

2. It frustrates me because:

3. A change I would like to see is:

4. I can help make this change by:

I will take the following positive steps to help make a change that lowers my frustration:

1.

2.

3.

¹ Adapted from: *Caring for My Family*, Michigan State University Extension.

Breathe and Connect**(For use with individuals, groups, and families)**

This activity is designed to provide a safe, comfortable environment to talk about frustrations and the need to be supported when facing challenging situations. The activity reinforces the idea that everyone gets frustrated sometimes, but those times are more easily managed when we feel supported by others.

You will need a big ball of yarn for this activity.

Have the family or other participants sit in a circle. They may use chairs or sit on the floor. Begin by taking a deep breath (inhale and exhale through nose). Then state, "I feel frustrated when ..." and complete the sentence. Ask for a volunteer who will take a deep breath then complete the same sentence, "I feel frustrated when..." Toss that participant the yarn ball, holding onto one end. The participant takes a deep breath, completes the sentence, holds a part of the yarn, and tosses the rest of the ball to someone else. And so on until everyone has contributed and everyone is connected through the web of yarn. You can add a layer by going around again, having participants complete the sentence, "I feel supported when..."



Resolving Conflict with Schools²

GO TO THE PERSON DIRECTLY.

Begin by talking with the teacher or other person you disagree with.

BE ORGANIZED.

Use a notebook (buy one or keep one for yourself when you get your child's school supplies). Prepare to discuss the concern by making a list of questions or points to bring up. This helps you know what's most important to you and keep the conversation on track if the school teacher or principal brings up other concerns.

STAY CALM.

Take a deep breath. Focus on the concern, not the person. Talk about facts and be clear. Ask to take a break if you feel too frustrated to stick to facts.

BE POSITIVE.

Even if you're not satisfied with the situation, think about what you do like about the school or staff and start with that before talking about the concern.

SEE THE OTHER SIDE.

Try to fully understand the other person's view of the situation, frustrations, or limits. Listen to any solutions they might propose. Ask questions about anything that is unclear.

USE "I" STATEMENTS.

Use "I" statements such as, "I believe," "I feel," or "I can," rather than "You should" or "You need."

STAY FLEXIBLE.

Be open to creative solutions. Most times, there is more than one way to solve a concern or problem. Sometimes the best solution is the one you come up with together.

KEEP RECORDS.

Save copies of letters, completed forms, and other materials. Bring your notebook with you to any school meeting. Take notes during or after the meeting (or both) to keep a record of what happened. Put the date of the meeting and who was there. Write down who said what. Write down anything you or the school staff said you would do and when you each agreed to do it by.

² Adapted from *Resolving Conflict with Schools: A Guide for Families*. Office of the Education Ombudsman.



Conflict Styles

Do you handle conflict differently with different people? What makes it the same or different? What choices can you or do you make to treat different people with the same amount of respect?

- What factors do you consider in deciding whether to speak up or not?
- If the person is a lot older than you, do you feel free to express your opinion? Why or why not?
- Do you deal with conflict the same way at work as at home? If they are different, how are they different and why?
- How did you see people in your neighborhood or town handling conflicts when you were growing up?
- How did your parents or caregivers deal with conflict? What were you taught was important when you are in a conflict?
- What do *you* wish to teach your child as most important in a conflict? Is it about “winning” or something else? Does place make a difference—does it matter if the conflict happens in a neighborhood, at school, or at work? Are there rules that apply to all situations?





When Drinking or Drugs Harm the Relationship³

There are several tell-tale signs that drinking or illegal drug use by a partner is causing harm to the relationship to the point that help from a treatment professional may be needed. Watch for some of these common danger signals:

- You and your partner have many arguments about drinking or drug use or things related to drinking or drug use, such as money problems, staying out all night or disappearing for days, and not taking care of responsibilities in the home.
- On different occasions, you have to cover for a partner who has been drinking or using drugs too much by making excuses for him or her, such as reporting to a boss or social worker that the substance user is “sick” or not around because they had to take care of a friend.
- Drinking and illegal drug use is the only or one of the few things you like to do together.
- You or your partner hit each other or use hateful words when drinking or using drugs.
- You or your partner only show signs of affection or talk about your relationship when you are drunk or high.
- Your relationship or family as a whole becomes isolated from friends and relatives to hide the drinking or drug problem.



³ Adapted from *Substance Abuse and Intimate Relationships*. American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.



Characteristics of Healthy Versus Abusive Relationships⁴

Healthy Relationships	Abusive Relationships
Partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint decisions Shared responsibilities 	Domination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuser decides Master/servant
Economic Equality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom in issues of work, school, and money 	Economic Control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deny freedom to have job or go to school Withhold money
Emotional Honesty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feel safe to share fears and insecurities 	Emotional Manipulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use jealousy, passion, and stress to justify actions
Sexual Respect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept that no means no Caring for needs and wants 	Sexual Abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treat partner as sex object Force partner to do things
Physical Safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respect partner's space Express emotion without violence 	Physical Abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hit, choke, kick, pinch, pull hair, poke, twist arms, trip, bite, or restrain
Supportive, Trusting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen and understand Value partner's opinion 	Controlling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name calling, mind games Isolate partner from friends
Respectful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Say positive things in public and private Sensitive to needs 	Intimidating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charming in public, menacing in private Destroy property, threaten pets or family with harm

The United States Department of Justice defines domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone. For more information, please visit the Department of Justice website at <http://www.ovv.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm> or contact the following:



National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TTY)



Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)

1-800-656-HOPE (4673)



National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline

1-866-331-9474

1-866-331-8453 (TTY)



National Center for Victims of Crime, Stalking Resource Center

1-800-394-2255

1-800-211-7996 (TTY)

⁴ Adapted from *Characteristics of Healthy Versus Abusive Relationships*. Alexandra House. www.AlexandraHouse.com



Chapter 7

Engaging in a Positive Social Network

Earlier chapters highlighted the skills that individuals build and strengthen individually (e.g., physical and mental health) and together within the relationship. This final chapter focuses on an external or environmental need for a healthy relationship—a positive social network.

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the positive influences of social connection on intimate relationships.
- Explore formal and informal ways to serve the greater community.
- Learn strategies to build others' confidence in and acceptance of a positive social network.

Key Concept

Couples live within the context of a larger community of relationships. These connections within the larger community can strongly aid in supporting and sustaining a couple's relationship over time. Some cultures value community relations more highly than others, and some individuals need connectivity to a larger social network more than others. Strong relationships with others can form a collective "safety net" that provides security for individuals and couples (Beach, Fincham, Katz, & Bradbury, 1996). Belonging, meaning, and support all flow to a degree through the *connections* that we develop and share with others, including our friends, family, and community members.

The connections forged in life can lead to a variety of practical benefits for couples. First, meaningful social connections can provide a natural support system for couples and families when they encounter stresses or challenges such as loss of a job or home, birth or adoption of a new child, or diagnosis of a serious health issue. Second, being connected with sources of meaning beyond themselves can furnish couples with differing perspectives as they look for happiness or cope with difficulties. Third, linkages to others in the community can open up a network of opportunities to help others when they encounter stresses and challenges or volunteer service at church or another helping organization—habits that can promote individual happiness and shared meaning for couples (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001).

Social Network as Support

Couples who experience greater social support experience higher quality and more stable relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Sources of support include extended family and friends, formal support services (e.g., counseling), teachers and counselors at a child's school, religious institutions, and other resources in a couple's community. Social support often improves economic, physical, and emotional well-being by offering resources that otherwise would not be available to individuals and couples.

Building meaningful and supportive connections with friends who are a positive influence—friends who have similar values and beliefs—can enable couples to avoid social isolation, reduce stress, and experience positive interactions with others. Despite this positive effect, in recent decades, couples tend to report fewer and fewer close friendship connections, often due to the influence of media and the demands of work (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006).

Social Network as Source of Perspective

Beyond support, being connected to a larger circle or community can instill individuals with a greater sense of meaning and purpose (Sullivan, Pasch, Eldridge, & Bradbury, 1998). Individuals begin to understand that they are only one piece of a greater world, and that there are opportunities outside their walls that make building healthy relationships and families worth the effort. Individuals 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 (Sullivan, et al., 1998). Overall, having a social network can help to guide individuals' and couples' attitudes and actions, provide stability and direction, and give comfort in times of difficulty.

Service to Others

Just as couples benefit from the support they receive from others, they can similarly benefit from the support they provide to others. Service to others leads to multiple positive effects on individuals, including increasing their sense of personal meaning, self-worth, and control (Luks & Payne, 2001; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Opportunities to provide service to others can be informal (see box). They also can include local volunteer work at service agencies, neighborhood associations, religious institutions, or not-for-profit organizations. More social service agencies are using peer mentors—successful participants in programs like healthy marriage and relationship education—to volunteer or be paid to bring in and mentor new participants. Service to others also builds potential sources of positive social networking for the couple and a shared sense of purpose and meaning. In the end, engaging in service to others provides couples with a greater overall sense of connectedness, both for themselves as a couple and in relation to the broader community.

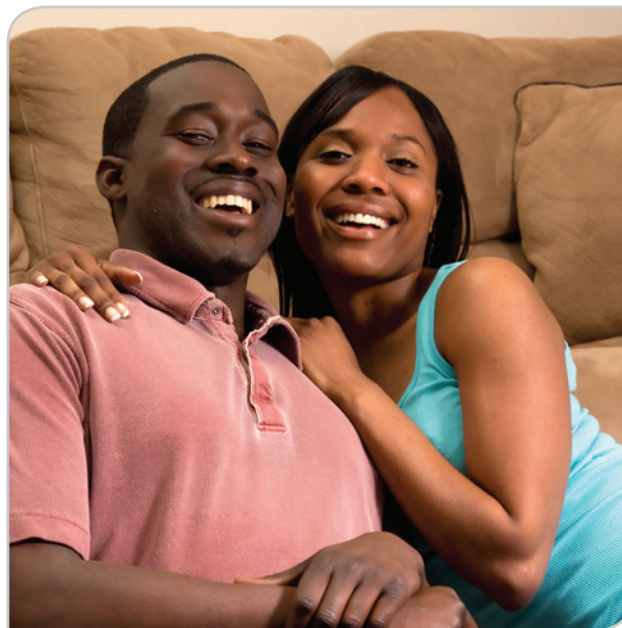
Building a Positive Social Network

- Let others help you.
- Keep in regular contact with your extended family or kin who have similar values.
- Get involved with community members or groups that support your relationship.
- Take part together in free community or church activities, and talk with others who are there.
- Be a support for others in your circle of friends and family. Talk often with your circle about how you can pool resources to be stronger together—from transportation, babysitting, and house repairs to taking turns laughing with, caring for, or helping out someone who's sick or just had a baby.



Summary

A healthy, stable relationship involves more than just the two partners. Regardless of age, race, income, or culture, engaging in a positive social network outside of the relationship is an essential element for a strong couple union. Through forging these connections, individuals are able to develop a community of social support, gain a sense of shared values and purpose, and assist in strengthening the individual lives and relationships of others around them. Social support often improves economic, physical, and emotional well-being by offering certain resources that otherwise would not be available to individuals and couples, leading to increased self-sufficiency. As the well-known adage states, *no man is an island* and neither are healthy, stable couple relationships.



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Chapter 7 Practice Tools

Take Away Message: Helping families, couples, and individuals identify positive supports and stay engaged in a positive social network is a core component of promoting a healthy couple relationship. Staying engaged involves not only routine contact with family, kin, and friends who share the same values but also giving in small ways that are meaningful to the individual and couple. Every person has strengths; one person might be best at providing concrete support like transportation, while another is the best person for emotional support.



Chapter 7 Conversation Starters

Exploring family and kinship support:

- How is your family different from the family you grew up in as a child? How is it the same?
- Who do you consider to be family? What family members are you close to?
- Who do you rely on in times of need?
- Who relies on you when they are in need?

Exploring community support:

- How long have you lived in your neighborhood (or community)?
- How is your neighborhood different from the one you grew up in? How is it the same?
- Do you belong to any groups, or a church or religious organization?
- What after-school activities is your child involved in?

Identify, Understand, Act**(For use with individuals, couples, and families in a group setting)**

This activity is designed to encourage individuals to think about the needs of their community. The first thing they can do is brainstorm community issues.

Have participants brainstorm community issues. Have them brainstorm all of the issues they can identify based on their knowledge and experience. Try to categorize needs into issue groups (homelessness, poverty, environment, hunger, violence, etc.), checking in with participants for general agreement on categories.

Next, have the group select one issue to focus on. To help brainstorm causes of the issue and its effects on both individuals and the neighborhood or community, use a mind mapping process as follows:

- Draw a large tree trunk and write the issue in the trunk toward the top.
- Draw a rough outline of branches and leaves at the top, and write in all the effects named up here.
- Draw roots at the bottom below the trunk, and record all the causes named down here.
- Next, extend lines from the outside of the trunk. Brainstorm and write on these lines the people, agencies, or other places that may have more information on the need.
- Have the participants think of one step they can take to make even a small difference (e.g., write a letter to an agency director that includes the tree drawing; volunteer for an hour at a place connected to the need) and challenge them to take the action.



Identifying Community Resources

(For use with individuals, couples, and families in a group setting)

This activity is designed to help individuals explore their community and themselves for resources. A resource is a source of supply, support, or aid. When a garden needs watering, the spout, hose, person doing the work, and water are all considered resources; they are things used to get the job done. Almost anything and anyone can be a resource depending on what is needed.

Have participants identify resources that address the needs of their community. Explain the different types of resources (individual, group, and material) to encourage a wide range of responses.

- Individual – Talents and skills that individual people possess. Some people know how to sew, others know carpentry, still others are good teachers, or know the history of the neighborhood better than anyone else. Each person in a community plays an important role because each person has different skills and gifts to share.
- Group – Sometimes we need to cooperate with others to get the job done. When two or more people work together on something, they create a whole new set of talents and skills as a team. There are lots of examples of team or group resources, such as clubs and organizations, athletic teams, non-profit organizations, and businesses.
- Material – The third type of resource is a material resource. The tricky part of this is that individuals and teams often control material resources, but they are different than the individual and team resources we discussed. Material resources might be the result of human skills and talents, but they are actual physical things. Material resources might be money, office space, food, computers, or trucks.

Also ask participants to identify people or things in the community that may be “problems” and discuss how they can become resources. For example, an old tire in an empty lot may be seen as a problem, but if you need a tire to build a sandbox, that old tire has now become a resource.

This can also be recorded by having participants write their resources on Post-it notes, and then sticking the notes under the needs they address.

Plan a Community Project

(For use with individuals, couples, and families in a group setting)

This activity is a service learning project designed to engage individuals or families in identifying a need in their community and then developing an action plan to address it.

Ask, “What can we do to be active in our community? Let’s find the needs in our community and think of ways that we can personally address them.”

1. Have the family identify areas that need improvement in their community (community can be neighborhood, town, city—whatever makes the most sense to the family).
2. Ask the family to think of ways they can help address the issue. For example, if a family has noticed that the local park is filled with litter, what can they do to fix the problem?

After identifying the community needs and ways they can help, encourage the family to plan a project they can complete together to address those needs. Facilitate their ideas by suggesting where to find missing information or free resources. Examples include:

- Picking up litter in a park after school one day and asking a grocery store to donate trash bags or empty boxes for the collection.
- Writing a letter to a local council member, mayor, or state member of Congress about a need and possible solutions; find the name and address for the politicians on the internet.

Tips for the Military Spouse to Stay Connected During Deployment

- Make others aware that you are married to a service member who is or will be deploying or away for an extended assignment. Informing your employer or teachers, your children's teachers, clergy, and health care providers will help them know about you and your family's situation.
- Connect with your family support network—family, friends, neighbors, clergy, teachers, and other military spouses.
- Attend pre-deployment events sponsored by your service member's unit to connect with other couples in the same situation. Share your ideas and preferences with each other, the unit chaplain, or family readiness officer on how to receive information and stay connected during deployment.
- Each branch of the military provides services that will assist you and your family. Ask your service member how to learn more about family resources. Visit the family resource center or the website for your service member's unit, command, company, or base.
- Military OneSource, an internet-based resource that provides a 24-hour call center staffed with master's level consultants familiar with the military lifestyle, answers questions and provides resources and referrals on everyday issues like finding child care, dealing with stress, helping children deal with a parent's deployment, and reunion and reintegration after combat duty. Military OneSource also provides counseling sessions and will set up face-to-face counseling sessions in the family's community. It also connects you to education and employment information and opportunities.
- Length of deployment, experiences during deployment, and reestablishment of relationships negatively affect some families more than others, including children. Seek out information from the unit chaplain or TRICARE or any other health insurance provider you use in order to learn about different types of counseling services available to you.
- Volunteer! Volunteering is a great way to stay busy, make new friends, and help others.
- Join community sports or recreation centers. They're great places for you and your children or teens to make new friends.





Getting Involved with Your Neighborhood¹

Do your children know your neighbors? Does your child know your neighbors' kids? Do the families of your community get together often? Community involvement starts close to home, in your neighborhood, and includes both youth and adults.

- Spend time outside when you notice that your neighbors are out. Introduce yourself and your children, and chat for a few minutes.
- Once you get to know your neighbors, get together periodically to discuss neighborhood concerns and shared values. It's easier to look out for one another when neighbors know each other and each other's children.
- Once you know your neighbors and have talked about shared values, encourage children to play together and take turns supervising them.
- Get the help of other parents and plan a neighborhood activity for children, such as a "fun run" or Halloween parade around the neighborhood, an art project like painting eggs (not just for Easter!), or a Frisbee toss or other game in a local park or open lot. Ask kids what they'd like to do, and get the word out by going door-to-door in pairs or trios.



Many families are fortunate enough to live in engaged communities in which adults and kids share a strong connection. If you live in one of these neighborhoods, take advantage of it! If not, you have a great opportunity for helping the children and adults around you. Start getting involved and make your community stronger.

¹ Adapted from *Getting Involved in Your Neighborhood*. Parent Further: A Search Institute Resource for Families.



What Kids Can Learn From Volunteering²

If volunteering begins at an early age, it can become part of kids' lives—something they might just expect and want to do. It can teach them:

- **A sense of responsibility.** By volunteering, kids and teens learn what it means to make and keep a commitment. They learn how to be on time for a job, do their best, and be proud of the results. But they also learn that, ultimately, we're all responsible for the well-being of our communities.
- **One person can make a difference.** A wonderful, empowering message for kids is that they're important enough to have an impact on someone or something else.
- **The benefit of sacrifice.** By giving up time spent playing video games or hanging out with friends to volunteer, and receiving thanks or encouragement from volunteer coordinators and others who benefit, a child learns that sometimes it's good to sacrifice.
- **Tolerance.** Working in community service can bring kids and teens in touch with people of different backgrounds, abilities, ethnicities, ages, and education and income levels. They'll learn that even the most diverse individuals can be united by common values.
- **Job and relationship skills.** Community service can help young people gain skills to apply to future employment, boost an application for college, and strengthen future relationships. Are they interested in the medical field? Hospitals and clinics often have teenage volunteer programs. Do they love politics? Kids can work on the campaigns of political candidates. Regardless of the service, kids can learn skills important to future relationships and careers like working as a team member, communicating effectively, resolving conflicts together, taking on leadership roles, and setting and achieving goals.



² Adapted from Community Service: A Family's Guide to Getting Involved. www.Kidshealth.org

WAYS TO SERVE YOUR COMMUNITY³

Look at the following list of activities and identify some that you could accomplish. Make a commitment to serve your community for at least one hour per week. Influence others positively; be humble about what you do but loud about the good of serving, and challenge your family or friends to volunteer a little bit of their time, too.

- Help a widowed, elderly, or overwhelmed neighbor (meals, transportation, errands, repairs)
- Do yard work or shovel the sidewalk for a neighbor or someone else
- Care for the children of a single parent while he or she runs errands
- Help a teacher before or after school
- Have a friend or neighbor over for dinner
- Swap baby-sitting with another couple with children
- Give a hug to someone at church
- Volunteer to help with a school event (e.g., baking for bake sale, greeter for back-to-school night)
- Give a smile
- Volunteer as a greeter for religious firesides, concerts, or other programs
- Bake something for a neighbor and hand deliver it to him or her
- Visit a hospital and volunteer to read stories to patients
- Share your talents (e.g., sing for or tell jokes to neighbors)
- Volunteer to help care for animals at the local animal shelter
- Volunteer on a 4-H project
- Volunteer in the church nursery
- Send a “thinking of you” or funny note to someone who’s feeling down
- Take your neighbor’s trash down to the curb

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

Before volunteering, it is important to find volunteer work that you have time for and enjoy. It’s also important to make sure that your commitment matches the organization or service project’s needs. The following questions can help you narrow your options:

- Would you like to work with people or would you rather work by yourself?
- Do you prefer to work alone or as part of a team?
- Are you better behind the scenes or do you prefer to take a more visible role?
- How much time do you have to volunteer?
- How much responsibility are you ready to take on?
- What skills or strengths can you bring?
- What social causes or types of work are important to you?

³ Adapted from *The Marriage Garden*. University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.





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