

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Building and Maintaining Healthy Relationships

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

However, as we move through life with our partner, there may be times when differences and difficulties seem to dominate the relationship. Fortunately, many couples are seeking solutions instead of exits. They are finding the courage to question and take responsibility for their choices and actions. Building and maintaining a mutually satisfying relationship takes commitment, time and ongoing effort.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

We hear about the importance of communication all the time, and without a doubt, effective communication is an essential building block to a healthy, satisfying relationship. The reality is that communicating effectively is often easier said than done. In relationships that are strained, it's common to find partners saying of each other, *"He or she just doesn't understand,"* or, *"He or she never hears a word I say."* Such comments point to a need to focus on and improve communication skills.

Consider the following suggestions to improve communication in your relationship:

- **Listen.** A first step to understanding our partner is to listen without interrupting. When couples have difficulty listening to each other, consider passing notes for a while. Getting things down on paper, then taking the time to read and respond, can help both partners learn to slow down and focus their attention.

- **Ask for clarification.** If you are picking up a mixed message, try something like, *"I'm confused. You say nothing's wrong, but your voice sounds unhappy. I care and I want to know what's going on with you."*

- **Speak up.** Remember, even though we may have the sense that our partners know us inside out, we cannot expect them to be mind readers. If we want our partners to understand us, we need to speak up and say what we mean.

- **Time it.** Choose the right time to talk about something important. For instance, it's probably not a good idea to bring up a sensitive issue just before bedtime. It may be necessary to set up a specific time to talk with your partner.

- **Find a spot.** Keep outside distractions to a minimum. Turn off the TV, find a quiet room or take a walk to have important discussions.

- **Fight fair.** Arguing one's point of view and disagreeing are bound to happen in every relationship. In healthy relationships, couples will argue or disagree without putting down their partner. Avoid comments that manipulate (*"If you loved me, you would"*), absolutes (*"you always"* or "you never") and labelling (*"you're stingy"*). When couples fight fairly, they let respect for their partners override their anger.

They also know and respect each others limits and call for a time out.

Problem Solving

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

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

- **Commit time.** The first step is setting a time aside to discuss strategies for problem solving. This needs to be done during a problem-free time. There are a number of useful steps to include in a problem solving strategy.

- **Discuss the problem.** Gather as much information as possible in order to understand the situation. This includes learning about how people feel about the problem as well as gathering facts.

- **Generate various solutions.** Once you have come up with a number of options, discuss the pros and cons of each.

- **Select the best option.** Even though the pros and cons have been identified, often there are a few options that emerge as good possibilities. It’s common for couples to get stuck at this step. If time permits, it can be helpful to take a break at this point and come back with a fresh outlook.

- **Test the decision.** Agreeing upon a schedule for household tasks and trying it for a one month period is an example of testing a decision.

- **Follow up and evaluate.** It's important to look at the outcome of our decision to see what is working, what is not working and to get feedback from all concerned. If one option or system doesn't seem to be working out, then the next step involves making some slight revisions or going back to the option list and trying something different.

Keep Those Loving Connections Alive

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

- Make a special effort to demonstrate thoughtfulness.

- Reminisce about times that were fun, romantic or when you felt close to your partner.

- Go out on a date. Rekindling romance is hard to do in the midst of family or household responsibilities. It’s often helpful to make a date to do something together as a couple on a regular basis. For couples with children, this would involve arranging for child care.

- It's important to develop interests and activities that can be done as a couple and things that we do on our own. Sharing an enjoyable hobby can go a long way in building connections, while pursuing our own interests will often provide for interesting conversations with our partner.

- Make plans for the future. A couple can strengthen their sense of togetherness by making plans for the future and working together toward those goals. It’s important to consider what each partner might want for themselves as well as for the relationship.

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When we think about improving our relationship, we have a tendency to focus on the flaws and weaknesses. However, it's important to identify and value our relationship strengths—those things that we do well most of the time. Then, begin by identifying one or two action tips that make sense and give them a try. Remember that progress occurs little by little, one step at a time.

Many couples have found that they have benefited from meeting with a professional counselor. The counselor can help identify areas to begin working on as well as strategies that are a good fit for the couple. Relationship building may sound like a lot of work, but by taking small steps together, the potential rewards that come from a satisfying, healthy relationship are endless.