

Keeping Up on Relationship Maintenance

Have you been struggling in your relationship due to being forced to spend an unprecedented amount of time with your spouse or partner and not having the social outlets you are used to having for a necessary escape, mental break, or as a sounding board and thus feeling isolated and frustrated? Were you experiencing issues in your relationship prior to COVID-19 and now these issues are amplified, feel inescapable, or perhaps have you thinking about divorce?



Whether you are married, living together, have a significant other, have kids or not, or are co-parenting with someone currently, all of these relationships will experience “Relationship Strain” at some point. In our current climate, sustaining a healthy relationship may be more difficult than ever before. The high stress environment of confinement, or pre-existing relationship issues, combined with the financial and health stress brought about by COVID-19 or life stressors in general, has led to a rise in relationship strain and marital conflict.

Experts often consider a relationship to be strained if the stress from your relationship is causing issues outside of your relationship or home. For instance, are the struggles you are having in your relationship causing problems at work, or with extended family and friends? Or perhaps your physical and mental health are being adversely affected by the strain your relationship is experiencing. According to Renee Teller, a Life Strategist and author, there are four main reasons that a relationship becomes strained: when there are issues with Money, Appreciation, Attitude and Trust.

Money – “The #1 source of relational conflict. You can easily see this in marriage, business, and between countries. In a research study by Sun Trust Bank, researchers discovered that the divorce rate is highest among couples with differing views on financial management.” We deal with money every single day in our relationships. Daily tension builds up over time and erodes the trust and appreciation we have for our partner. Talk about it and get on the same page.

Appreciation and Attitude – Everyone wants to be appreciated for their contributions in relationships of all kinds. If we aren’t validated and appreciated for what we bring to the table, or if a relationship feels mostly negative and is neglected, chances are your relationship is already strained. Having a positive attitude about your partner and your relationship carries over into important discussions and daily interactions alike.

Trust – Experts say that trust is key to a successful relationship. It is often said that, “Trust takes a long time to establish, but only a moment to lose.” Whether it is trusting that your partner has your best interest at heart when making decisions, trusting they have your back when things get rough, or trusting that they aren’t behaving in ways to hurt you or your relationship – trust is a necessity. This incorporates feelings of safety and compassion.

What to do:

What can we do about the issues you may already be facing that contribute to a strained relationship, or if you are just becoming concerned that your relationship is headed in that direction? Let’s look at some common relationship destroyers and helpful tips that you can try immediately, whether you start with yourself first, or trust in your partner to bring them in on this conversation. The best time to start is now. If a crisis creates opportunity, then what better time than now to work on your own relationship struggles, your own communication style and skills, and to stop the further deterioration of your relationship?

Banish the Four Horseman:

Renowned relationship expert John Gottman warns couples about these four common destructive habits taking over your relationship, any one of which will exacerbate the strain in your relationship and if left unchecked, can end it as well.

- **Criticism:** “is like offering a negative opinion of someone because they didn’t meet an expectation.” You’re not inviting emotional connection – rather, you are conversing with emotional and verbal attacks.
- **Contempt:** also known as the single greatest predictor of divorce, “is when you attack your partner’s character with a sense of moral superiority.” And it is said to be “a vile form of toxic hatred that stings to the core and corrodes the presence of love.”
- **Defensiveness:** “is when you respond to a form of criticism or contempt from your partner with the same form of criticism or contempt.” This destructive communication habit is problem focused, not solution focused, and avoids responsibility. This continues a vicious cycle.
- **Stonewalling:** “is when you shut down and withdraw from your partner.” This resembles someone refusing to speak and potentially walking off or leaving the home during a discussion. You can take a “time out” from a heated discussion, but you must return at some point and continue to communicate. You should also communicate that you are doing exactly that.

Pay Attention and Be Present:

In other words, don’t act like you know everything about your partner, what they are thinking or doing, or what they are about to say, or that they are doing the same thing that they “always do.” Be an active, present listener and try to really hear your partner, instead of just thinking about how you’re going to respond or defend yourself.

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?

Our instinct to be “right” often destroys a relationship. If you have to be “right” then your partner has to be “wrong.” Do not turn your relationship into constant debates where no one is listening to the other and you erode love, affection and trust. Talk feelings, not facts, as in, “I feel...” instead of accusing. The goal is not to win, but to care about your relationship more.

Try the 5% rule:

Mel Schwartz, LCSW, says to try to find just a small percentage of what your partner is saying that you might agree with? Just find 5 percent of what they are saying that you can acknowledge, and temporarily suspend the 95 percent you’re sure your partner is wrong about. Asking someone to go against their usual way of communicating, and to not defend themselves nor try to score a point, can be difficult. Keep in mind that you aren’t pleading guilty or surrendering by acknowledging something your partner said, but rather recognizing that the goal is simply to establish a connection so that partners can now “hear” each other. Validating something you’re hearing sets the stage for a vital shift in energy. And then ask your partner to do the same. Whether the struggles or relationship strain you may be experiencing right now during the current COVID-19 pandemic are new to you and your partner, or you were experiencing these issues prior to the shelter in place environment, we now have very few distractions, outlets, or places to hide from what is going on in our homes. You may feel like you are in a pressure cooker, or like you are emotionally flooded and ready to make a major change in your life. Whatever you are experiencing, this opportunity for relationship growth and self-reflection, may be an urgent necessity and the extra time we may have resulting from the pandemic, can be a gift for some people.

Remember, there is help and support waiting for you. Try calling your EAP for no-cost, confidential counseling for yourself, or as a couple, or for helpful resources. Seek out support from your place of worship. Look into couples retreats or seminars. Research books and workbooks on relationships. And remember, you are not alone.

Resources:

The Gottman Institute - A research-based approach to relationships:

<http://www.gottman.com>

Check here for the 100 best relationship blogs and websites to follow in 2020:

https://blog.feedspot.com/relationship_blogs/



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