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Thriving in Today's Times: Stress and the Marriage

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All marriages experience stress. A change in occupation, a new baby, financial worries, and illness can affect the marital relationship. Furthermore, often the couple does not feel comfortable discussing their worries with community resources, other family members, or even each other.

Open communication between the partners is imperative in coping with stress. When communicating with your partner, it is important to remember the following points:

- Communication takes time. Make sure communication is a priority in your marriage. Open communication should be a standard in your relationship, not just something you fall back on during stressful times.
- Communication includes talking and listening. Be sure that you listen to your partner and try to see their perception of the problem. Your partner's perception may not be the same as yours.
- Listening is not just with your ears! Watch your partner's body language. Does the body language you see match the verbal language you hear? For example, does she say she is not mad, though her arms are crossed and her stance is tense? Is he saying pleasantries while he drums the table with his fingers? Try to clarify your partner's body language. Use statements such as "You seem tense. Do you want to talk about it?"
- Understand that males and females often communicate differently. While females might discuss their feelings more often than men, men might tend to want to discuss information and facts more. This

difference does not mean that your partner does not understand you; it only means that they indicate their concerns in a different manner. For example, while a mother may agonize emotionally over the fact that they can't afford a prom dress for their daughter, the father may try to analytically explain the financial status of the family.

- Understand that statements such as "I'm mad," or "This is so frustrating," do not translate to "I'm mad at you," or "You are frustrating me!" Understand that your partner is maddened or frustrated at the situation—not at you.
- Use "I" statements instead of blaming statements. For example, instead of "You're always busy and I always have to deal with the children," try saying, "I am scared about what is happening and I really want to discuss it with you. Can we make some time?" The latter statement does not put your partner on the defensive, but rather explains your true concern.
- Try to reflect, summarize, or clarify your partner's statements. For example, a partner saying "I am worried about our finances" could mean to the other partner that the speaker is worried about putting food on the table. However, in reality, the statement was about the putting the children through college. Make sure you understand what your partner means, so you can address the concern correctly.
- Understand that quality communication can be affected by one's energy level, past discussions, and even personality. Take time to choose an appropriate time to discuss an issue. For example, don't start a discussion as soon as your partner walks through the

door. If past discussions have been frustrating, try coming at the talk from a different angle.

Open, positive communication is an extremely important way for couples to cope with stressful situations. Another coping strategy is to support each other. Here are ways to support each other:

- Plan ahead. Don't wait until the problem becomes overwhelming. Discuss stressors that could apply to your family before they happen. Have a contingency plan. For example, what options do you have if you or your partner is laid off? As a couple, decide how much money needs to be saved each month for these events.
- Learn to negotiate and problem solve as a couple. Create family rules and develop agreed-upon methods for handling problems. Understand that often and openly discussing and brainstorming about the problem is the best way to find the best possible solution. Understand that it is OK to have a difference in opinion. The key is taking the time to find a compromise.
- Show confidence in your partner's skills and decisions. Often, decision making is difficult and frustrating. Due to forces beyond the family's control, decisions may have been made quickly. Understand your partner's need for approval during a time of crisis.
- Provide encouragement and concern for each other. Show support for each other. Let your partner recognize your willingness to listen, help, and problem

solve together. This may mean allowing your partner to vent, or it may mean you understanding when plans have to be changed unexpectedly. It is important to ask what can help. The answer may surprise you.

- Have realistic expectations of each other. There are some stressors that can't be prepared for. And in reality, there is only so much one can do. Be aware of what can and cannot be accomplished. Make sure your partner realizes that you understand this. Discuss realistic expectations openly and work out what needs to be done together. Don't assume your expectations of each other are the same.
- Spend time together. Express affection during a stressful time. It is important to be there for your partner both physically and emotionally. Don't make every moment together a problem-solving time. Relax with each other, laugh with each other, and celebrate your relationship. Realize it is OK to have happy times during a crisis. Don't feel guilty for going to a movie or laughing together when things are stressful.

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