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Thriving in Today's Times: A Role Change

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John has worked for the same employer for over 15 years. John has always enjoyed working, and his wife, Mary, has always loved being in charge of the family's everyday needs. John and Mary are proud of their work ethic and have always looked forward to sharing their heritage with their children. But due to circumstances beyond John's control, John lost his job, and in order to make ends meet, Mary is now working in town at a local school. Both John and Mary struggle with their new responsibilities.

In every family, roles and responsibilities have been established. For example, the mother may be responsible for primary care of the children and household duties, whereas the father is expected to pay the bills and go to work. Although these roles are not formally assigned, it is understood by the family that roles are to be followed.

In an economy with business closings and job loss, families often must face role restructuring. Role restructuring is defined as "adding or relinquishing roles as well as changing relationships among role partners" (Ievers 1999).

For John and Mary, role restructuring took place when John lost his job and Mary had to get a job outside the home. John no longer brings in the money, and he had to learn to let his wife claim that role. That role strain frustrates him, and he takes it out on the family. Mary, on the other hand, may be in role overload, feeling that her new responsibilities are too stressful and complicated. Mary experiences a feeling of displacement—for years she had been in charge of the family's everyday needs, but now John is helping the kids and Mary no longer feels needed at home.

In an efficient business, every employee has a responsibility. This is true for families as well. In a family that has had major role displacement and changes, it is imperative that everyone have a well-defined role. Each role must be agreed upon by all members of the family in order to prevent role captivity—i.e., somebody assuming an undesirable role.

To prevent role strain, role overload, displacement, and/or role captivity, it is important that all family members communicate openly about needs or concerns. Issues such as business decisions, financial matters, family traditions, farming and ranching techniques, and even child rearing should be "on the table."

Tips for family communication

- Each family should have familial and individual boundaries. Boundaries allow each family to have its own traditions, rules, and privacy.
- People from different eras may have different ideas. For instance, a man who experienced the Great Depression may have a different perspective on borrowing money than that of his children or grandchildren. Learn to accept differences in values and find ways to compromise when making decisions.
- Hold family meetings. Work toward shared decision making on issues that will affect all families involved.
- Use good communications skills, such as listening without interrupting and using "I" statements like "I am frustrated when..." instead of "You make me so mad." Clarify what was said.

- Make sure all expectations are explained and agreed upon. Don't assume that the other person knows what you want or that you know what you are expected to do.
- Recognize everyone's contribution. Problem solving should be a shared responsibility. Everyone needs to feel valued and important.

In times of crisis, family members may fail to communicate either with each other or with others outside the family who will help them process the situation. If there were sources of strain before, a crisis may only make things worse between family members—unless you take steps to get different results.

Discuss and practice the tips for family communication listed above, and set up a family meeting using the guidelines for family meetings outlined in ExEx14069, "Thriving in Today's Times: The Family Meeting."

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