

PeopleTALK:

Enhancing Your Relationships

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Personal relationships take hard work. They don't just happen; they require attention. A relationship can become stronger and more satisfying by focusing on your friendship with the other person and learning how to manage your differences.

Maintaining a 'strong friendship'

People often think that being married for a long time, or having a life-long friend, means little effort and work goes into that relationship. Whether you realize it or not, meaningful relationships require continual attention. "Strong friendships" are important in our lives, and they are especially important in marriages and intimate relationships. However, keeping a friendship going in a marriage — or with another family member — can sometimes be more difficult and take more time and attention than with a friend. Here are some suggestions:

Share everyday happenings with each other

When you talk to a friend in person, on the phone, or through an e-mail message, you may share and listen to each other about the small details of what's happening in your individual lives and how you are feeling about it. The same thing needs to happen in a marriage and with other family members who are close to you. Couples who have lived together for many years may think they know everything there is to know about the other person. However, we are constantly growing and changing, and our reactions to what is happening around us change, too. Unless that is continually shared, a spouse may have no idea a change in the other partner has occurred. Young couples who have an active and growing family can run

into the same problem, thinking they don't have time to share and spend time with their partner. That can be dangerous to a marriage as they may find themselves growing apart and not turning to each other when challenges arise. Having a deep friendship helps us turn toward — rather than away from — a special person during both good and bad times. That is important for long and enduring relationships.

Listen attentively

Sometimes, people have to consciously practice how to communicate with another person with whom they want to build or maintain a good relationship. Listening is often more difficult than talking. What are some ways to truly listen to another person who is speaking? Focus on that person by:

- a) Maintaining eye contact in a manner that is culturally appropriate for you;
- b) leaning forward;
- c) making non-verbal gestures like nodding your head;
- d) giving simple and positive responses;
- e) **not** interrupting even when you disagree or have something to share; and
- f) showing positive expressions, such as reaching out and gently touching the other person on the arm in a non-invasive, comfortable and supportive way.

The second part to listening is making sure you understand the message correctly. Simply say to the other person,

- "Now, let me tell you what I heard you saying, and the feelings you seemed to be expressing. Am I correct?"

If not, the speaker can repeat the message with different words until the listener has correctly understood the message and the

feelings attached to the message. This is not easy to do if you disagree with the message you heard. It takes patience and determination to hold your opinion until you reverse roles and have the opportunity to be heard.

Show fondness and admiration

It is sometimes much easier to criticize and find fault, rather than recognizing positive qualities about the special people in your life, especially family members. For example, maybe you would like your spouse to help with the housework without being asked. So, you complain repeatedly. In most instances, this will not improve the situation. John Gottman, from the University of Washington, has studied couples for many years to find out what makes marriages work or end in divorce. He found that expressing fondness, encouragement, and admiration toward each other—often in small and unexpected ways—goes a long way in maintaining strong marital relationships. To use this idea with other important people in your life, it may be as simple as thanking your adult daughter for stopping by to see you or giving her an unexpected hug. Gottman says good relationships are maintained when there are five positive interactions for every one negative interaction, a **5:1 ratio**.

It takes effort to stop the negative thoughts, remember good times, and remember how valuable that person was to you in the past. Forcing yourself to have positive thoughts about the other person

when you are apart helps set the stage for more positive interactions when you're together.

Managing differences

What often harms friendship in a marriage or close relationship is having a very severe problem between the two of you that cannot be resolved and does not go away. The following four stages can lead to divorce or to living with an unhappy situation.

- Two people think of their problems as extremely difficult.
- Talking together about an issue seems useless. They never make progress in resolving the issue or learning to live with it, so each may try to solve the problem independent of the other. Nothing gets better.
- Their difficulties pull them away from each other, and they start leading parallel lives, not spending time with each other, not talking to each other in meaningful ways, not showing fondness toward the other, nor sharing their everyday lives.
- They each become lonely and do not reach out to each other in good times and bad.
(Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 45)

Here are 10 suggestions for two people who are special to each other, but have a serious disagreement that is threatening their relationship.

1. Bring up tough issues softly.

When one person wants to bring up a tough issue, bring it up **softly** at a time that makes

sense and by not accusing the other person. For example, if a married couple is having money problems, bringing up the issue on how they use the credit card while one of them is watching a favorite TV program probably is not the right time.

2. **Avoid using the word “you” to blame.** People feel defensive when someone brings up a touchy issue by saying something like, “**You** never want to go on vacation.”
3. **Use ‘I’ statements to talk about problems.** Softly bringing up an issue requires you to say how it affects you without blaming the other person. For example: “When I get no phone calls from you, I feel lonely and sometimes worried because I think maybe I did something to offend you in our last conversation or that something bad has happened to you.”
4. **Make messages short during disagreements.** Address only one issue at a time and don't go on and on. You will lose the opportunity to open a beneficial dialogue if your messages are lengthy and cover multiple issues. Be alert to ways you can soothe each other during a heated conversation, such as a response like, “I see.” However, you need to know what is soothing to the other person and what will not cause even more irritation.
5. **Be respectful even during conflict.** Avoid calling the other person names, being sarcastic, degrading the other person, or

bringing up issues of the past as a way to criticize the other person. This behavior is very damaging to a relationship.

6. Agree on rules for difficult discussions. For example, you may need to agree you will not talk about your daughter loaning money to an old friend when the two of you are discussing paying for her computer classes.

7. Suggest a 'time out' to cool down. If you find a discussion is getting out of control, ask the other person for a "time out" so both of you can calm down and not say things you may regret later. Be sure to set another time for resuming the dialogue and work at having positive thoughts about the other person, rather than dwelling on the conflict. You could get yourself more worked up during the "time out" if you don't force yourself to quit thinking negative thoughts about the other person and the issue that has come up between the two of you.

8. Calm your body in times of conflict. Think about ways your body reacts to conflict (e.g. tight jaw, racing heart, pounding headache, tight neck muscles). Think of methods that work for you in reducing body stress (e.g. opening and closing jaws, deep breathing, walking, stretching neck muscles). Use the techniques that work for you to get your body calmed down during a conflictual situation. As you are calming down, try to have positive thoughts about the other person and the good

times you have had in the past. It takes about 20 minutes for the body to resume a normal heartbeat and pulse rate when it has been stressed out.

9. Be willing to compromise in ways you both can accept. This means you have to listen with an open and honest ear to each other's perspective and feelings about an issue. Compromising, and letting the other person influence you, helps to decrease the hurt and pain so the problem doesn't eat away at the relationship. It also helps to develop an understanding and patience with each other's faults.

10. Honor each other's hopes and dreams. Many problems between two people result from conflicting hopes and dreams that have not been thoroughly discussed. Get inside the other person's world by listening when that person is ready to talk. You may not agree with the hopes and dreams the other person has, but showing you are listening attentively may eventually open the door for more discussion. Prying needlessly, or trying to give advice, will shut off the other person's willingness to share. Being interested in each other's hopes and dreams is often hard work.

A few last thoughts....

Healthy relationships thrive in an atmosphere where each person feels comfortable in talking honestly and openly about important things. In this way, minor issues can be talked about

before they become larger issues that can damage the relationship. Just as importantly, a satisfying relationship is about creating shared meaning and having a sense of connection to the other person. It is about spending time with the other person and honoring each other's hopes and dreams. Everyday ways of respectfully talking and interacting with each other make a difference, too. William Doherty, from the University of Minnesota, emphasizes the importance of establishing rituals that connect family members to each other. It

Ways to PeopleTALK for satisfying relationships

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- Bring up tough issues "softly."
- Avoid using the word "you" to blame.
- Use "I" statements to talk about problems.
- Make messages short during disagreements.
- Be respectful even during conflict.
- Agree on rules for difficult discussions.
- Suggest a "time out" to cool down.
- Calm your body in times of conflict.
- Be willing to compromise.
- Honor each other's hopes and dreams.

can be as simple as saying goodbye in a special way in the morning as family members go their separate ways or making time for each other to share the day's events after the evening meal. Likewise, friends can establish their own rituals that create a bonding and lasting relationship. Satisfying relationships help create unity among families, friends and communities.

For more information on couple relationships, contact your county Extension agent in Family and Consumer Sciences.

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