

Protect Your Relationship From Stress, Part I

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Far too many couples have perfectly good relationships that are being unnecessarily damaged by stress. Our lives really are moving at a faster pace, and we now spend far more time at work than our parents and grandparents. As a result, we devote less time to our primary relationships than in previous generations. Living in a connected world further erodes our relationships because devices like cell phones and pagers can keep us mentally preoccupied with work even when we are at home.

Many couples' relationships are in also in peril simply because both partners work, and have little time for each other. Some do so out of financial necessity, whereas others want to "have it all," sacrificing the present for a future goal. As a couples therapist, I have seen how getting to "freedom 55" can be very hard on a marriage; such people ignore the present at their peril. Whatever the reason, the main culprit tends to be overwork and exhaustion, which creates stress - and chronic stress has a way of undoing a relationship - not necessarily all at once, but little by little.

How can you tell if stress is affecting you or your relationship? This may seem like an easy question to answer, but according to Wayne and Mary Sotile (authors of the highly recommended *Supercouple Syndrome*) many people who overwork lapse into numbness and denial rather than admit to being stressed. Many seemingly successful people run into trouble because they are preoccupied by work, have no time for others (so their relationships wither), and they alienate others by being busy or grouchy, and tend to miss important developmental and relationship milestones. If any of these are true for you, you might want to consider to what extent it is affecting your relationship with your partner. And as I said before, everyone gets stressed from time to time - but it's the prolonged, chronic stress that we want to avoid, because that can create emotional distance from which it may be hard to recover.

If stress hurts relationships, what can you do about it? The first step is to recognize the signs (see above), and just notice if your stress bucket is full (i.e., irritability, detachment, poor sleep). Step Two is to manage your own stress, and Step Three is to work together with your partner to manage stress. In today's column, I will address stage two: managing your own stress:

- **Exercise:** although it doesn't address the source of your stress, exercise is as close as it comes to a "magic bullet" for dealing with the effects of stress. Not only does it help wash all those nasty stress hormones (like cortisol) out of your body, it gives you that lovely lingering endorphin effect (which will make you much calmer and friendlier).
- **Prioritize:** to paraphrase psychologist Dr. Randy Paterson: if you feel overwhelmed, you are overwhelmed. Do what you can to organize your tasks and reduce a sense of chaos.
- **Sleep:** because sleep deprivation just makes things worse (lowered productivity, crankiness, accidents, etc.), it is essential to make quality sleep a top priority. If you can, avoid caffeine and stimulating activities in the late evening (like watching TV).
- **Pleasure:** schedule pleasurable activities. It doesn't have to be a big deal: just make time for some of the things you used to do before you got so busy.
- **Nurture Yourself:** find some time during the day to do something you enjoy, and try to unwind (even briefly) at the end of the day with a soothing activity (i.e., reading, yoga, bath/shower).
- **Seek Assistance:** if your stress is the result of counterproductive habits like perfectionism or chronic anger, it doesn't hurt to seek someone's advice or even read a self-help book on the topic.

