

Protect Your Relationship From Stress, Part II

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In a previous column, I explained how chronic stress – if left unresolved - can undo even the healthiest relationship. Because we live in a society that places so much value on work performance, many couples find their relationships falling apart not because of internal factors (like poor communication), so much as the cumulative effect of external stressors, often related to overwork and financial concerns.

Prolonged stress affects our ability to interact with others; we become grumpy, preoccupied, and emotionally unavailable, all of which creates emotional distance in our core relationships. The catch is that if our closest relationships suffer, we damage the very foundation that allows us to go out there and work so hard. But if we all work hard, and stress is inevitable, what can be done about it?

You can (as noted in the previous column) manage stress through exercise, organization, healthy sleep habits, rejuvenating activities, and seeking social support. It also helps to make the effort not to take out your distress on others – which has a negative feedback effect on your own well being (and increases your stress). However, if you can find more productive ways of venting frustration (i.e., exercise, keeping a diary), you protect your closest relationships, and they will in turn nurture you.

Stress management can also be a team effort if you work with your partner to protect your relationship. One highly effective strategy is to support each other in creating appropriate boundaries between work and home. Take a cue from former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who so valued his family life that he was virtually unreachable from Friday afternoon to Monday morning. Think about it: if the person in charge of an entire country can take his phone off the hook every weekend, so can you (even if it's only for part of the weekend).

Another way to beat stress together is to set aside some time every week for recreation. Many couples try to have a date night once a week (or once a month). Keep it simple: a walk, a bath, a meal, a massage, a movie, anything. How about just flopping on the floor? Many parents of toddlers are familiar with the practice of “floor time;” bonding with their child by playing with them on the floor. Couples can do this too: just throw a few cushions on the living room floor, lie down (put your feet up, get a glass of wine if you want), stare at the ceiling and see where your conversation takes you. You can support each other with friendly reminders during the week, so that it becomes something you both look forward to.

These strategies work well when stress is in the moderate range, but what do you do if both of you are trying to cope with severe stress? First, be aware of the dangers of positive feedback - and I don't mean the good kind. Positive feedback happens when both partners are highly distressed, overworked, and/or sleep deprived. When neither partner is capable of rational, flexible responses, it can lead to rapid escalation of conflict. If this is happening in your relationship, it helps if you can: 1) take a step back and recognize that neither of you is at their best (i.e., cut each other some slack), 2) avoid blaming the other person (they are just as stressed out as you are), 3) utilize as many as the stress management strategies (listed above) as possible, and 4) do your best to support each other in your stress management efforts.

Have a relationship question you would like answered in this column? Send yours to: drestrin@shaw.ca. Dr. Terry Estrin is a Registered Psychologist with offices in Richmond and Vancouver.