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Making Relationships Work in Difficult Times

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Any partnership, even good marriages, has bad times. It may help to consider relationships as works in progress, a long-term commitment in which the "downs" sometime outnumber the "ups." Here is advice to help guide couples in difficult situations.

Signs of a Healthy Partnership

Shared goals, values, and dreams clearly help keep a relationship alive and vital. Do other factors indicate whether your relationship will make it? There's no crystal ball to give us that answer, but here are some signs of strength to look for and build on:

- **Flexibility** and the ability to compromise. Knowing when to agree to disagree.
- The ability to **communicate** or, at least, the desire to learn how.
- **Shared decision-making** and acknowledgment and respect of important aspects of each other's lives.
- **Pulling together** in times of trouble. Sometimes, a specific problem can be a wake-up call that leads to a stronger relationship.
- **Sense of humor**, the ability to lighten up and let go.
- **Caring enough** to fight. Partners who are passionate about their differences stand a better chance of healing.
- **Realistic expectations** and acceptance of the other person's frailties.
- **The ability of partners** to go their separate ways, pursue different interests, then come together and share their experiences.

Many of the ways in which we interact in our relationships are based on patterns of behavior we learned in the family we grew up in: for example, how we communicate feelings, how we express and assert ourselves and how family roles are divided. Here are some ideas that can help us create and maintain healthy relationships with our partners:

- *Don't make promises* you can't or won't keep.

- **Be reliable in small things.** This helps build trust.
- **Keep short-term arguments** in perspective. These will pass if they are not blown out of proportion.
- **Be clear** about what you want and the value of what you are trying to achieve in your relationship
- **Don't assume the worst** every time you have the same hassle. Many fights are triggered by similar events. Examine and try to change negative patterns of interaction in your relationship.
- **Re-pledge yourselves** to each other aloud occasionally.
- **Keep a journal** and photo albums. Read about-or look at-the good times when things get tough.
- **Examine the key dimensions** of your relationship. Look for ways to strengthen your attraction to each other, improve your communication, feel more trust, have more strength of purpose and enhance your enjoyment of each other.

Your partnership is like a pot of clay. Whatever it becomes is up to you, the sculptors.

Communication Rules for Effective Problem-Solving

When people try to become "open" in their communication with one another, they must agree to a set of rules so their discussion doesn't deteriorate into an argument or conflict. Here are some rules to consider.

1. **Be specific** when you introduce a gripe or complaint.
2. Don't just complain, no matter how specifically; **ask for a reasonable change** that will relieve the gripe.
3. **Ask for and give feedback** to the major points, to make sure you are heard, to assure your receiver that you understand what he/she wants.
4. **Confine yourself to one issue at a time.** Otherwise you may skip back and forth, evading the hard ones.
5. **Do not be glib or intolerant.** Be open to your own feelings, and equally open to your receiver.
6. **Always consider compromise.** Remember, your receiver's view of reality may be just as real as yours, even though you may differ. There are not many totally objective realities.
7. **Do not allow counter-demands** to enter the picture until the original demands are clearly understood, and there has been clear-cut response to them.
8. **Never assume** that you know what your receiver is thinking until you have checked out the assumption in plain language; nor assume or predict how he/she will react, what he/she will accept or reject. Crystal-ball gazing is not for communicating.
9. **Don't mind-read!** Ask! Do not correct a receiver's statement of his/her own feelings. Do not tell a receiver what he/she should know or do or feel.
10. **Never put labels on receiver.** Call him/her neither a coward, nor a neurotic, nor a child. If you really believed that he/she was incompetent or suffered from some hopeless basic flaw, you probably would not be working together very long. Do not make sweeping, labeling judgments about his/her feelings, especially about whether or not they are real or important.
11. **Sarcasm is dirty fighting.** Never, never engage in sarcasm if you want to be friends afterward.
12. **Forget the past and stay with the here-and-now.** What either of you did last year or last month or that morning is not as important as what you are doing and feeling now. And the changes you ask cannot possibly be retroactive. Hurts, grievances and irritations should be brought up at the very earliest moment, or the receiver has the right to suspect that they may have been saved carefully as weapons.
13. **Do not overload your receiver with grievances.** To do so makes him/her feel hopeless and suggests that you have either been hoarding complaints or have not thought through what really troubles you.
14. **Meditate.** Take time to consult your real thoughts and feelings before speaking. Your surface reactions may make something deeper and more important. Don't be afraid to close your eyes and

think.

15. **There is never a single winner in a discussion.** Both of you either win more understanding, or lose it.

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