

THE STRESS REDUCING CONVERSATION

We all live busy stressful lives, but there is nothing worse when complaining about a stressful moment than to find your one true love seeing 'eye-to-eye' with the enemy.

Research conducted by John Gottman demonstrated that couples who were able to effectively de-stress together reported feeling closer to and more supported by their partners. It is a great daily ritual that builds and strengthens connection between couples.

The exercise below will help you get started. If you would like to learn more about how to conduct these conversations successfully, or how to build a strong, close, intimate relationship, register for one of our couple workshops, or contact us for information about locating an accredited Gottman therapist.

The Exercise

Take turns telling each other about the stress you are under, the things you worry about, your irritations at work and elsewhere, etc. Each partner gets to be the complainer for fifteen minutes, while the other is the listener. The following instructions are for the listener:

Don't give unsolicited advice: As the listener, if you quickly suggest a solution to your partner's dilemma, he or she is likely to feel that you are trivializing or dismissing the problem, which will usually backfire. In effect you're saying, "That's not such a big issue. Why don't you just...?" So the cardinal rule when helping your partner de-stress is that understanding must precede advice. You have to let your partner know that you fully understand and empathize with the dilemma before you suggest a solution. Often your partner isn't asking you to come up with a solution at all - just to be a good listener or a shoulder to cry on. Women tend to be more sensitive to advice-giving than men. In other words, when a woman tells her partner her troubles, she often reacts negatively if he tries to give her advice right away. Instead, she wants to hear that he understands and feels compassion. Men are more likely to be tolerant of immediate attempts to problem-solve. However, a man who emotes to his partner about his work troubles would probably prefer that she offer him sympathy rather than a solution. Men, especially, can get caught up in thinking that when their partner is upset, their role is to take care of the problem. A big burden can be lifted once they realize that this is not their responsibility.

Show genuine interest: Don't let your mind or eyes wander. Stay focused on your partner. Ask questions. Make eye contact.

Communicate your understanding: Let your partner know that you empathize. "I'd be stressed too! I can see why you might feel that way."

Take your partner's side: This means being supportive even if you think his or her perspective is unreasonable. Don't side with the opposition - this is likely to have your partner feeling resentful or dejected. For example, if your partner's boss chewed him or her out for being five minutes late, it's not advisable to say, "Well, maybe Bob was having a bad day." Instead, consider saying "That's so unfair!" The point isn't to be dishonest or even patronizing. It's simply that timing is crucial. When your partner comes to you for emotional support, your task is not to cast judgment or tell him or her what to do.

Express a "we against others" attitude: If your mate is feeling all alone in facing some difficulty, express solidarity. Let him or her know that the two of you are in this together.

Express affection: Hold your mate. Put an arm on his or her shoulder and say, "I love you."

Validate emotions: Let your partner know that his or her feelings make sense to you. Phrases such as: "Yeah, that is really sad. That would have me worried, too. I can see why you'd be annoyed about that."

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