

Keep Your Marriage Strong in Stressful Times

When money gets tight, a couple's relationship can be stretched — and stressed — as well. Spouses may handle tough times differently, says Cheryl Clark, an Iowa State University Extension family life field specialist. These varying reactions and feelings can pull couples apart or bring them closer together.

“Don't give up on your spouse because he or she acts differently than you. Instead, look at the many ways that differences can strengthen your relationship,” Clark said. “You can use the differences in your couple relationship to help you handle stressful times.”

Iowa State University research on strong marriages suggests that men and women truly can vary in the ways they handle highly stressful times. A husband's behavior may become more negative toward his wife when there is economic stress, and he may be more irritable when conflicts arise. A wife often feels less affection and satisfaction in the marriage, and may become angry and irritable as a direct result of their husband's negative behavior.

A man may find it difficult to talk about personal feelings and needs, and would rather “do” something than deal with his feelings, such as work longer hours than usual, Clark explained. A woman may interpret this to mean that her husband doesn't care, but that isn't necessarily true. Her partner just may not be able to express his feelings in words for a variety of reasons. He doesn't want to lose emotional control, he may think that talking might hurt too much or perhaps he has difficulty in choosing the right words. A woman often is viewed as the person who does the most talking in a relationship. She may be the one in the marriage who expresses her feelings very easily and more freely than her partner. This easy release is a part of a person's coping style and doesn't mean that she is out of control.

“Good communication is an important factor that helps families get through tough times,” Clark said. “Even though it can involve some risk, it is well worth the effort to break through the wall of differences to support each other as a couple. Communication takes two to tango and is the responsibility of both the husband and the wife. Communication includes more than talking. Couples who pay attention to listening, non-verbal expressions and use of silence can learn how to honestly communicate with each other during tough times.”

Clark offers seven general tips for improving family communication during tough times.

1. Give your spouse your full attention; put aside whatever you are doing — even the dishes or the newspaper.
2. Be open and respectful of each other's opinions even when you disagree.
3. Clarify what you don't understand with words like: “Tell me more about ____” or “How long have you felt this way?”
4. Relate your feelings simply and directly when it is your turn to talk.
5. Don't judge, blame or evaluate. Instead, describe how a person's behavior affects you — “I feel ____ when ____ happens.”
6. Be aware of how your body, tone of voice and timing for holding the conversation might be interpreted. Problems arise when verbal and non-verbal messages are different.
7. Develop an action plan together to work on keeping the communication lines open between you and your spouse during times that are tough.

“As part of that action plan, agree to express frequent, sincere appreciation for your spouse's strengths, and arrange to have some quality time together that involves something you both enjoy doing,” Clark said. “Keep your communication open — listen for those unspoken feelings and watch for signs of stress.”

Marriage is a team of two people who together can work through a situation to find a solution and manage consequences of tough times, Clark continued. Be flexible, share the burdens and do what makes sense for the family, rather than worrying about what other people think.

For more information on ways to keep your family strong during these tough times, see Iowa State University Extension's Managing Tough Times Web site, <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/toughtimes/Families/>.