

YOUR MARRIAGE - Keeping it strong in stressful times

Tough times economically can also mean tough times for marriages. Most couples recognize they have different emotional needs at times. In fact, the differences can keep a relationship interesting. But when money gets tight or when a couple faces financial loss and possible lifestyle changes, differences in how each spouse copes can spell conflict within the marriage.

Iowa State University researchers have found a husband's behavior becomes more negative toward his wife when there is economic distress. As the

husband becomes more irritable, conflicts arise. The wife feels less affection and less satisfaction with the marriage. The study shows that men, more than women, seem to be at risk in showing antagonism



toward their spouses as a direct result of economic problems. Wives are more likely to become angry and irritable as a direct result of their husbands' negative behavior.

Differences between spouses

Don't be surprised if you and your spouse react differently to what is happening in your lives right now. One of you may feel sad or depressed while the other may feel mostly angry and fearful. Don't give up on your spouse because he/she acts differently than you do. When partners differ in how openly they express emotion, they have to understand and accept the differences and realize that neither way is better.

Often it seems men find it hard to talk about personal feelings and needs. They would rather "do something" than deal with feelings. This can translate into working even more hours than usual. A spouse who keeps feelings inside might seem like he/she doesn't care. But, that's not true—your partner can't or would rather not or just doesn't

verbally express feelings.

Talk can be hard for people because they:

- don't want to lose emotional control;
- think talking would hurt too much;
- can't stand to say or even think about what they would say;
- have difficulty finding the right words;
- assume words won't help.

A woman is often viewed as the partner who does most of the talking and questioning. She may be on a roller coaster of emotions. Tears flow easily. A spouse who expresses feelings freely might seem too emotional to the other partner. But this easy release of emotion is part of the person's character and often helps that person cope with life.

MANAGING Tough Times

Good communication helps

One factor that can help a couple get through tough times is good communication. But in tough times when partners need each other's support the most, communication can be difficult.

Communication takes at least two people and is the responsibility of both people involved. It includes talking, listening, nonverbal expressions, and silence.

Begin by listening to your spouse. Give your partner your full attention, and put aside whatever you are doing. Be open and respectful of each other's opinions even when you don't agree.

Listen for words, but also pay attention to

unspoken feelings. Use phrases like, "tell me more about that" or "how long have you felt that way." This shows you are listening and will encourage further sharing.

When it is your turn to talk, relate your feelings in a simple, direct way. Describe how other people's behavior affects you without blaming or evaluating. Be aware of your nonverbal communication. Your facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture can speak louder than your words. Problems arise when body language and words send different messages.

Develop action plan

To help your marriage weather the tough times, develop an action plan.

1. Learn to express sincere appreciation to your spouse. Concentrate on your partner's strengths. Don't take each other for granted.
2. Arrange to spend quality time with each other doing something fun you both enjoy. Laughter and play are great means of coping with stress.
3. Keep the lines of communication open. Make yourself available to listen even when your spouse is not ready to talk. A gentle touch or kiss can show support when you don't know what



else to say or do.

4. Share responsibility for decisions that affect the family. Together you are a team who can come up with workable solutions and manage the consequences.
5. Maintain flexibility in who does what in the family. Share the burdens and do what makes sense for the two of you and your family. Do not be swayed by what others might expect. When times get tough, couples need to show love and affection toward each other. If the marriage is to last, it must come first.

Provided by Iowa State University Extension—Marriage and Couples Relationship Education Team
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