OHIO DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

Frontlinefocus

EAP OHIO EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

MARCH 2015 | HELPING AND SUPPORTING YOU TO LIVE WELL AND SERVE WELL...

The Relationship Edition

Last month, Valentine's Day offered an opportunity for us to let the ones we love and care about know how much they mean to us. Cards, flowers or a nice dinner are examples of how we express our feelings on that day. However, Valentine's Day is just one day. Healthy relationships are developed over time and are continually nurtured. In this issue of Frontline Focus, the Ohio Employee Assistance Program considers the topic from three perspectives: personal, family and parent-child relationships. Tips are offered to help you build or rebuild the relationships that are most meaningful to you.

Enhancing Relationships: Strengthening Commitment

Love is wonderful, but no one ever said love relationships are simple or easy. Any partnership – even a good marriage – can have bad times. It may help to consider relationships as a work in progress; a long-term commitment in which the "downs" sometimes outnumber the "ups."

Relationships Are Cyclical

Ups and downs are part of a cycle couples can expect to experience many times in their relationship. We may not love our partner all of the time – and the other person won't always be there for us. If we accept this reality, we'll have a better chance of getting through the "down" times.

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 the ability to acknowledge and respect important aspects of each other's lives;
- Pulling together in times of trouble;
- A 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; and
- The ability of partners to go their separate ways, pursue different interests, then come together and share their experiences.

Rethinking Old Patterns

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. But most of us live in different circumstances these days. Some of the behaviors we learned are not what we want our relationships to be like now.

Here are some ideas from family counselors 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.
- Keep short-term arguments in perspective. These will pass if they're not blown out of proportion.
- Give thought to the purpose of your relationship. Be clear about what you want and the value of what you're trying to achieve.

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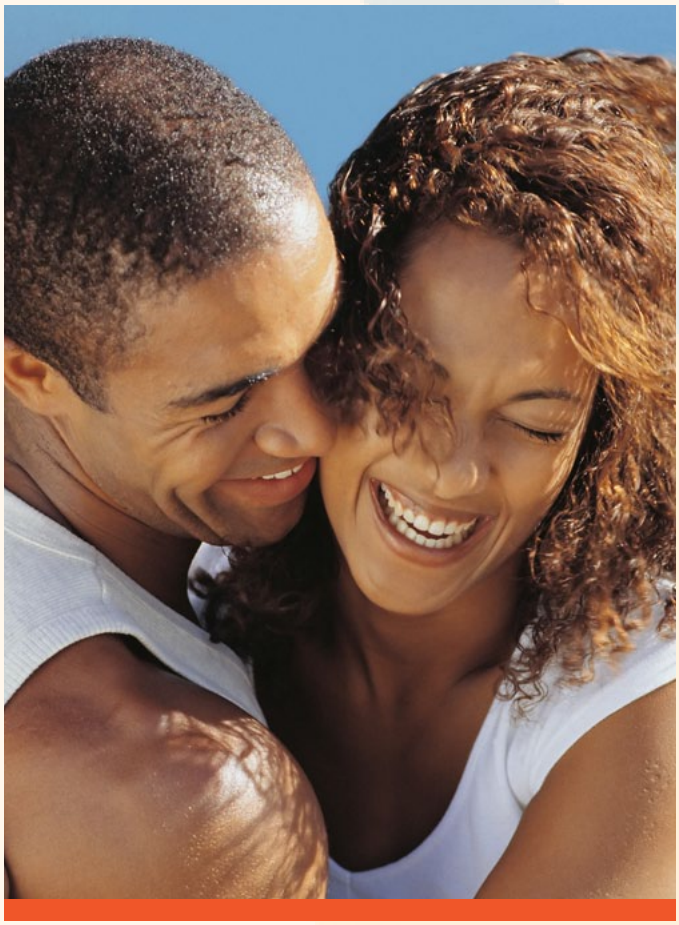
- Don't assume the worst every time you have the same hassle. Many fights are triggered by similar events. Examine and try to change negative pattern interactions in your relationship.
- Re-pledge yourselves to each other aloud occasionally.
- Keep a journal and photo albums. Read about – or look at – 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.



Help Your Marriage Survive a Crisis

Research has shown that couples who strengthened or sustained their marriages during times of crisis used similar strategies.

- Keep a realistic perspective of the crisis. This keeps the effects from spreading to other areas of your lives.
- Avoid blame. Don't waste energy blaming and criticizing. It distracts you from focusing on problem-solving.
- Laugh. A sense of humor helps you keep perspective and is a great stress reliever.
- Exercise control. It's natural to feel fear and anger during a crisis. There are ways to express them without hurting others. Understanding that these destructive emotions are related to the crisis can help you maintain control.
- Support each other. Because some crises have a snowball effect, be on the lookout for growing problems or mounting tension. Supporting each other now may prevent future problems.

Eight Rules for Stronger Communication

1. Stick with the issue. Don't turn an argument into a laundry list of past grievances or a major blowout over whether you still love, want or trust each other.

2. Use "I" statements. Avoid "you" statements – as in "You never listen to me" or "You're so selfish." Try "I" statements – such as "I feel demeaned when..." – to express your own feelings.

3. Be direct. If you need a hug, say "I need a hug."

4. Talk positively. Avoid hopeless comments such as "Here we go again. I can't take this anymore." Try instead: "We can get through this together."

5. Cool down – before you get nasty. Call time-out. Just say you want to take a break – that you're not leaving the disagreement unresolved. It can also help for partners to agree on a specific time to hammer out an issue.

6. Listen to each other. Repeat your partner's concern – whether or not you agree with it. "What you're saying is that when I need more space, you feel I don't love you anymore."

7. Show that you care. Remember that little things mean a lot. Use pet names and ask questions like "How was your day?" "Did you sleep well, sweetie?" Thoughtfulness and politeness create a foundation for intimacy.

8. Admit when you're wrong. Explain why you acted the way you did. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I was in a crabby mood because I had a hard day at work. I took it out on you. Please forgive me."

Strengthening the commitment in a relationship isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. Call the Ohio Employee Assistance Program's confidential phone number: 800-221-6327 or log on to the *Live and Work Well website* (enter code: 00832) any time for help with any of life's challenges.

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Improving Family Relations

Every family is its own unique combination of people and personalities. Even though they come in all shapes and sizes, healthy families have some commonalities. A healthy family is comprised of people who love each other and are able to respect each other's similarities and differences. Healthy families also know how to compromise, and they are fiercely resilient; they bounce back after crisis and periods of prolonged stress.

Negative Coping Strategies

Obviously, not all families have healthy relationships. Some members incorporate negative strategies for coping with stress. Some examples are distancing, overdoing/underdoing, focusing on a child, or jumping into conflict. These negative ways of managing stress harm the family dynamic.

Distancing – This unhealthy strategy occurs when family members avoid conversations together because they are concerned about potential conflict. They stop sharing their thoughts and feelings and fail to spend real time together.

Overdoing/underdoing – With this negative coping method, one or more family members begin to assume the responsibilities of others. When this happens, the remaining members decrease their efforts. Family members can easily become stuck in this imbalance of responsibility.

Focusing on a child – To avoid conflict, some families will simply focus on a child instead. When severe stress or fighting begins, children are usually the most vulnerable in the household. Therefore, parents will focus their attention solely on that child to calm things down. Their intentions might be good, but often the child reacts to this intense pressure and increased attention. These children will typically begin to act out or develop physical or emotional symptoms.

Conflict – A final negative coping mechanism is conflict itself. Some families will start an all-out war when they're stressed, engaging in yelling and emotional abuse. The smallest disagreement could set someone off, creating a hostile environment.

Tips to Improve Family Relations

There are many positive ways to manage stress and handle conflict. The following strategies for communication skills, relational values, and personal and family responsibilities provide simple solutions for improving family dynamics.

Communication Skills

- **Communicate openly** – Unlike the negative strategy of distancing, family members feel comfortable asking for help if needed. They're able to speak up when they disagree. If they see a different solution to a problem, they voice it. Because conflict is unavoidable in a family, open communication is essential.

- **Think before you speak** – Responsible family members think first and then speak. Too often we automatically react to a situation based purely on emotion. If we are able to create some space and consider the other's perspective and thoughts, we can focus on responding instead of reacting. Problem solving and compromise are much easier when they come from a non-reactive place.

Relational Values

- **Explore values** – Family members won't agree on everything. There will be preferences for different hobbies, tastes, or even political or religious views. However, there are common values that family members may choose to share and uphold. For example, a shared value might be showing mutual respect for all family members. Another might be to demonstrate appreciation for one another with acts

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of kindness. Shared values become the mortar for a strong family foundation.

- **Develop one-to-one relationships** – In a healthy family unit, every individual has a solid relationship with every other person. No one teams up, complains, or gossips in a family member's absence.

Personal and Family Responsibilities

- **Take personal responsibility** – Schedules today are often very full. Families can easily fall out of sync and become unclear about who is doing what. Certain family members may take on more than what is required of them. Others might be all too willing to allow that to occur, so they can have fewer responsibilities. Conflict arises when one assumes another will handle a situation, and they don't. In a healthy family, individuals own their personal responsibilities and accept any consequences for failing to do so. Family members encourage one another and hold each other accountable.
- **Ask for help** – Stress happens to every family. A strong, healthy family focuses on the positive in challenging times. Family members are able to pull together, share responsibilities and problem solve. If the family needs additional help, strong families don't hesitate to ask for it. Friends, neighbors, religious communities or helping professionals all serve as excellent resources for families.

The success of a healthy family largely comes down to being together. When you make time for one another, you communicate that you care with more than just your words. Make time to have fun and celebrate each other's victories. Listen to one another's stories, thoughts and feelings. Make memories and laugh together. When working toward the common goal of a healthy family, everyone has a shared interest in success.

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Tips for More Rewarding Parent-Child Relationships

Parenting has always been a challenging job, but it used to seem like a simple recipe. Start with one working father. Add a stay-at-home mother, then mix in some kids.

Today, raising kids is more complicated, with a variety of possible living situations. Just 23 percent of married-couple families in the U.S. with children younger than age 15 had a stay-at-home mother. Twenty-seven percent of children younger than age 18 lived with one parent, and four percent with no parents. Behind each of these statistics are unique families where parents are working hard to build a rewarding relationship with their children and help their children thrive. Balancing work and family is often part of the equation, and maybe even balancing care for an aging parent at the same time. Single parents and those with stepfamilies face additional challenges.

It all adds up to a tougher job than ever before for parents, and children's needs (rather than parental expectations) often set the tone for family life. The problem with this scenario, however, is that children find it difficult to thrive without clear parental expectations and support. Children lacking adequate structure, support and discipline may exhibit problem behaviors or poor academic performance.

Remember the Fundamentals

Remember that the goal of parenting is to communicate clear expectations, so you minimize day-to-day power struggles. Children thrive when their days are structured and predictable. The more they know what's expected of them, including when and how to satisfy those expectations, the more consistent their behavior will be.

Pay Attention

Take the time to know the "who, what, when and where" of your children's lives. Pay attention to your children and try to figure out what makes them tick. Encourage them to talk about what they think and feel, while remembering

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how it felt to be their age yourself. Actively listen to them and respond by telling them what you have heard them say. Treat them with respect. Be accepting and consistent.

Stressor Warning Signs for Parents

Once children start having problems, it's not uncommon for parents to begin to disagree with each other. The stress of this marital conflict further undermines parents' effectiveness. Take the time to pay attention to physical, emotional and behavioral signs that may signal you're feeling stressed. Some of the symptoms of stress include:

Physical

- Sleep disturbances
- Back, shoulder, neck or jaw pain
- Tension or migraine headaches
- Digestive distress
- Fatigue
- High blood pressure
- Irregular heartbeat or palpitations

Emotional

- Depression, moodiness
- Nervousness, anxiety
- irritability, frustration
- Memory problems
- Lack of concentration
- Feeling out of control
- Overreactions

Nine Steps to More Effective Parenting

Here are some ways to tackle your child-rearing responsibilities that will help you feel more fulfilled as a parent, and enjoy your children more, too.

1. Nurture Your Child's Self-Esteem. Choose your words carefully and be compassionate. Let your child know that everyone makes mistakes and that you still love him or her, even when you don't love the behavior.

2. Catch Your Child Being Good. Make a point of finding something to praise every day. Be generous with rewards – your love, hugs, and compliments can work wonders and are often reward enough.

3. Set Limits and Be Consistent with Your Discipline. A common mistake parents make is failure to follow through with consequences when rules are broken. Being consistent teaches your child what you expect.

4. Make Time for Your Children. Many parents find it mutually rewarding to have prescheduled time with their child on a regular basis or look for other ways to connect with their child.

5. Be a Good Role Model. Be constantly aware that you're being observed by your children. Model the traits you wish to cultivate in your child. Treat your children the way you expect other people to treat you.

6. Make Communication a Priority. Children want and deserve explanations. Children who participate in decisions are more motivated to carry them out.

7. Be Flexible and Willing to Adjust Your Parenting Style. As your child changes, you will gradually have to change your parenting style. What works with your child now won't work as well in a year or two.

8. Show that Your Love Is Unconditional. Avoid blaming, criticizing, or fault-finding. Instead, strive to nurture and encourage even when you are disciplining your child. Make sure he or she knows that although you expect better next time, the love for your child is the same.

9. Be Aware of Your Own Needs and Limitations as a Parent. Try to have realistic expectations for yourself, your spouse and your children. Take time out from parenting to do things that will make you happy as a person (or as a couple). Focusing on your needs doesn't make you selfish. It simply means you care about your own well-being, which is another important value to model for your children.

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Your employee assistance program offers confidential help for personal problems and concerns. Concerned about a troubled family member who won't get help? Feel tired and exhausted, but don't know if it's burnout, loss of motivation, depression or all three? Late for work too often? Has use of alcohol or drugs created a crisis you are facing right now? The bottom line, never wonder if your concern is appropriate to contact OEAP. So, if you've been putting off taking action to solve a serious issue that is weighing on you, give OEAP a call today.

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