

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

What Are Our Strengths as a Couple? How Can We Build on Them?

John D. DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator; Maureen H. Burson, Extension Educator; Ann M. Fenton, Extension Educator; Jeanette L. Friesen, Extension Educator; Janet S. Hanna, Extension Educator; Mary E. Nelson, Extension Educator; Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator; Dianne M. Swanson, Extension Educator; LaDonna A. Werth, Extension Educator

Couples often have a very clear picture of what’s wrong with their relationship, but have not spent any time focusing on their strengths. Identifying strengths can help couples develop a stronger bond with each other. This is No. 4 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Assessing Your Strengths

It always amazes us to see this, but in our experience we find that couples often do not have a clear picture of the strengths of their relationship. Why is this the case? We live in a problem-oriented society: The focus is almost always on defining problems and finding solutions. Thus, couples often have a very clear picture of what’s wrong with their relationship, but have not spent any time whatsoever at focusing on their strengths.

The trouble with this approach is that we use our strengths to deal with our problems. And, if we don’t have an understanding of our strengths it is difficult to see how problems can be dealt with successfully.

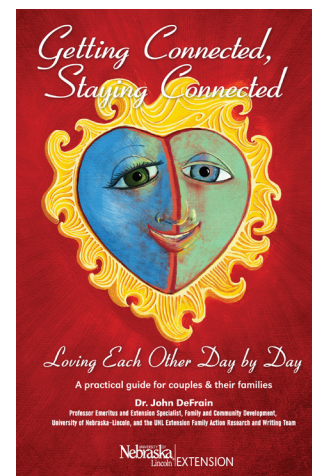
Our focus here will be on the strengths of your relationship with your partner and how these strengths can be built upon to develop an even stronger bond with each other. A useful way to begin the discussion of couple strengths is to fill out the *American Couple Strengths Inventory*. It is found that many couples are delighted to learn about their strengths. It is quite common for a spouse to say, “I always think about our problems and this is the first time I’ve really thought about

our strengths. It’s really neat to see how many good things we have in our marriage.”

Taking the *American Couple Strengths Inventory*

The *American Couple Strengths Inventory* has evolved from research that Nick Stinnett began in 1974. More than 28,000 family members have participated in this research in the U.S. and 38 other countries around the world. On the basis of research over several decades we believe that a useful model for describing couple and family strengths includes six major strengths: appreciation and affection for each other; commitment to the couple and the family; positive communication; enjoyable time together; a sense of spiritual well-being and shared values; and the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. Each quality builds on the others, and if a couple has one quality, they are quite likely to have many others. The key is that if you look for strengths in your relationship, you will find them, and if you nurture these strengths they will grow.

So, begin this fascinating process by filling out the couple strengths inventory together.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

Appreciation and Affection		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		caring for each other
		respect for each other
		respect for individuality
		physical and emotional affection
		tolerance
		playfulness
		humor
		put-downs and sarcasm are rare
		we are both committed to helping enhance each other's self-esteem
		a feeling of security
		safety
		we genuinely like each other, and we like being with each other
		Overall rating of appreciation and affection in our relationship
Commitment		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		trust
		honesty
		dependability
		fidelity or faithfulness
		we are one
		we are family
		sacrifice
		sharing

		Overall rating of commitment in our relationship
Positive Communication		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		open, straightforward communication
		discussion rather than lectures
		positive, not negative communication
		cooperative, not competitive
		non-blaming
		a few squabbles occur, but generally are consensus building, rather than a winner and a loser
		compromise
		agreeing to disagree on occasion
		acceptance of the notion that differences can be a strength in our marriage and that we do not have to be exactly the same
		Overall rating of positive communication in our relationship
Enjoyable Time Together		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		good things take time, and we take time to be with each other
		we share quality time, and in great quantity
		we enjoy each other's company
		serendipitous (unplanned, spontaneous) good times

		simple, inexpensive good times
		Overall rating of the enjoyable time we share together
Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		happiness
		optimism
		hope
		a sense of peace
		mental health
		a functional religion or set of shared ethical values that guide us through life's challenges
		oneness with God
		oneness with Nature
		oneness with that which is sacred to us in life
		supportive extended family members
		involvement in the community, and support from the community
		the world is our home and we feel comfortable in it
		Overall rating of spiritual well-being and shared values
The Ability To Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		share feelings
		understand each other

		help each other
		forgiveness
		“don’t worry, be happy”
		growing through crises together
		patience
		resilience (the ability to “hang in there”)
		Overall rating of our ability to manage stress and crisis
Overall Ratings of Our Couple Relationship		
<i>(S = Strength; G = Area of Potential Growth; and NA = Not Applicable in our relationship)</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Name</i>	
		the level of closeness with each other
		the level of satisfaction with each other
		the level of happiness with each other
		the level of strength of our relationship

Discussing Your Strengths

It is important to remember that each partner is likely to have a different view of their relationship and what is happening in the family. Even though you may eat at the same table and witness the same things happening in your life and the life of your extended family, you are very likely to *see things differently*. Professionals who work with families like to say that, “We don’t see the world *the way it is*. We see the world *the way we are*.” In other words, each individual filters the world through her or his own lens of perception.

For example, what might seem to be a friendly joke to one person could seem like a very hostile attack to another person. Or, what seems to one person like a kind offer of assistance might feel like an imposition to another individual. Couples are quite likely to interpret what is happening in the relationship and in the family quite differently from each other. This is why it is important to continuously discuss your perceptions of what is going on and to compare your perceptions with your partner. You may be very happy with what is happening and you may find that your partner may be very upset. Only clear and open communication can smooth out your path together.

People who love each other don't always agree, and they would be foolish to try to stamp out all disagreement. Rather, it is wise to recognize that *you will automatically have different views* and then enjoy creating new strategies so your different ways of looking at the world mean you can still continue to live happily together. In regard to your strengths as a couple, discuss your different perceptions and then come to a consensus on the strengths that you can both agree upon, and the areas of potential growth that you can also agree upon.

Building on Your Strengths: A Useful and Fun Activity

Try this simple exercise: Pick two of the couple strengths that you agree upon and write brief plans (in the space provided below) that you can follow for a month to make these fine qualities that you have even better:

Our Strength: #1

Our Plan for Enhancing Strength #1:

Our Strength: #2

Our Plan for Enhancing Strength #2:

Now choose an area of potential growth — an area in your couple relationship that is not yet a strength but that you would like to work together on to develop into a couple strength. In the space below, write down the area of potential growth you will work on together, and your plan for doing this.

An Area of Potential Growth We Would Like to Improve in Our Relationship:

Our Plan for Improving This Area of Potential Growth:

For a month, work together on enhancing the two strengths you have chosen to focus on; and, work together on improving the area of potential growth you have chosen. Mark your calendar for a month from today. Make a note that you will have a date together to sit down in a relaxed, loving and friendly manner and talk about your progress in building on your strengths as a couple!

Questions to get conversation going on your couple strengths:

1. What personal strengths attracted you to each other?
2. How do you celebrate each other's strengths?
Example: Words of affirmation
3. How can your strengths become your weaknesses and how will you recognize the change?
4. How will you each solve the issue of differing perceptions on a comment or a situation?
5. What will be the outcome of regularly checking your Couple Strengths Inventory?

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

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