

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Through Thick and Thin: Loving Each Other when Hard Times Come

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Hard times are stressful, but if a couple focuses on family and couple strengths, they will be better able to deal with the stresses and crises that inevitably occur in any relationship. This is No. 17 in a series of 20 Neb-Guides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

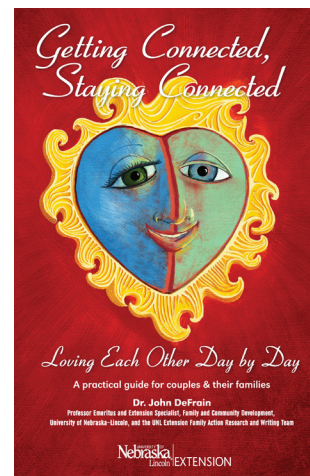
It can be argued that two of the biggest secrets of the 21st century are the fact that all couples face crises in their relationship and that a crisis can be a catalyst or cause of positive change and growth in the relationship. We don't tend to talk much about hard times in life, especially when our marriage is going through a rocky period. We feel ashamed that we can't handle the trouble, and we aren't eager to share the problem with other people, especially relatives and friends. So, we feel isolated and alone in our troubles and come to the conclusion that *we're the only people on earth who are suffering*. Of course, this isn't true, but because so many people in the world go around wearing a happy-face mask in an attempt to hide their real feelings, we jump to the erroneous conclusion that they're happy and we aren't.

Another big secret of the 21st century is the fact that hard times can be an opportunity for growth and change in a positive direction. By working together, couples can find ways to improve their life and end up loving each other even more. In a crisis couples can do three things: 1) crash and burn; 2) muddle through the problem, neither losing nor gaining; 3) rise above the crisis by joining together on the same team and solving the problem.

Hard Times Are Stressful

Hard times in life generate stress for couples. *Stress* has been defined in many ways. One definition focuses on the body's response to various events in our world. When we perceive something especially threatening to us, our nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action. Our heart pounds faster, our muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, we breathe faster, our senses become sharper and more focused.

Stressors are those external events or changes in our life that cause an emotional or physical reaction. Different people are likely to respond to the same stressor in different ways. One person may be able to take the event or change in stride, while another may come unglued. The reaction depends on the individual's resources: personal strengths and capacities, couple and family strengths, one's ability to frame the event in a positive way, and other external resources.



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.

Is Stress Good or Bad?

Stress sometimes can be good, sometimes bad, and sometimes both. Too little change or challenge in life can be a problem for a couple and a family. If we don't have enough to do in life, enough to challenge us, enough pushing us to keep us growing, we become bored and lack motivation to do anything. On the other hand, if there is too much stress or change in our life as a couple and family, we are likely to develop emotional and physical problems and experience feelings of discomfort and distress.

There is a middle ground that seems best. The middle level of stress in life leads to feelings of engagement and excitement. We feel alive and energized, and this energy helps us function well.

Our body responds to good stress in the same way it responds to bad stress. For example, we are riding a bicycle and are out of control and know we are going to crash: Our heart pounds faster, our muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, we breathe faster, and our senses become sharper and more focused.

Now, think about romantic love or commitment to a fascinating career. These are *good* stressors. But our body reacts the same way it reacted in an impending bicycle wreck: heart pounding, muscles tightening, blood pressure up, breathing faster, senses sharpened and focused. Love, career, and a bicycle accident are quite similar in many ways, aren't they? Odd, but true. Good and exciting and meaningful things in life over the long term can be harmful for us. Too much of a good thing can be as dangerous as too many negatives.

Chronic, relentless stress that we are feeling because of an unhappy work situation can harm us in many ways, both physically and emotionally. Likewise, if we genuinely love our job but work too hard, are too busy, and can't seem to ever get off the merry-go-round, our body and mind are also stressed. It may seem strange, but many people will tell you that they have the best job in the world, and in the same breath say that they are taking medication for clinical depression. Too much of a good thing is just too much.

It is essential to find balance somewhere in the middle. *Some* stress, *some* change, *some* challenge in life is good for us, while too much stress, too much change, too much challenge in life leads to potential emotional and physical breakdown.

A balanced approach makes the most sense. Being in this state of balance is called *eustress*. This is the positive form of stress, the form that is beneficial for the individual. Too much stress leads to a state of *distress*. Too much change, too much challenge, too much of a good thing in life over a long period of time leads to emotional and physical breakdown.

What Doesn't Work When We Are Under Stress?

Pouring yourself several stiff drinks when you lose your job may bring a short-lived bit of euphoria, but in the morning you still don't have a job and you may have a hangover. Solving problems and dealing effectively with stress demands that our communication skills and reasoning powers be working well. The solutions most often come when we are working

together to help each other. Chemical depressants draw us away from each other and numb our capacities to find solutions to life's problems.

Sometimes we lean on other diversions to help us manage the stress: snacking or overeating, smoking, or using prescription drugs or illegal drugs. None of these are genuine solutions. In fact, they often complicate life by adding other problems that cause more stress.

Common Stressful Events Couples and Families Face

Researchers in the field of family studies have made it very clear that there are many common stressful events for couples and families. David Olson, Hamilton McCubbin, and their colleagues at the University of Minnesota studied 1,000 intact families to learn more about how husbands and wives view stress in each stage of the family life cycle. The researchers divided the families in the study into seven groups, based on where each family was in the family life cycle: young couples without children; childbearing couples; couples with school-age children; couples with adolescents in the family; couples with children about to launch from home; empty-nest couples; and couples in the retirement years.

The researchers found that:

- **Stress and strain are common** in all seven stages of the family life cycle.
- **Financial strains ranked first** in five of the seven stages of the family life cycle. Strains among family members were present in all seven stages of the family life cycle; and strains caused by work outside the home were stressful for all ages and stages.
- **A major pileup of stressors and strains** occurs during the launching period when young people are soon to be leaving home. During this time, couples report their lowest levels of family satisfaction.
- **Stress drops dramatically and family satisfaction increases** among couples in the middle years and for those whose children have left home.
- **Husbands and wives are generally in agreement** in their view of the number of demands upon them. However, the researchers found that wives reported slightly more demands than husbands during four stages — childbearing, school-age children, launching, and empty nest.
- **Losing, quitting, or retiring from a job.** Many families experienced considerable stress when a family member left a job, whether they were leaving by choice or by the employer's decision. This occurs in all stages of family life but was especially common during the young couple stage and the launching stage.
- **Illness and death in the family.** Serious illness of a family member or close relative affected about 33 percent of families in all stages, but was especially common

in the launching and empty nest stages. Roughly 20 percent of the families throughout the life cycle were affected by death. This occurred most often during the launching, empty nest, and retirement stages.

Difficulties in life are very common. Everyone experiences hard times. Everyone endures stress and strain. Everyone suffers sometimes. Sometimes these stresses and strains are so severe that we feel we are near the breaking point.

Why some couples and families fail and some succeed has fascinated researchers and counselors for many years. Pick a crisis in life: a death in the family, loss of a job, financial difficulties, deployment of a family member in wartime, retirement, pregnancy, a health problem, a new member or members in the family. Some couples or families, when facing one of these crises, will be torn apart in their struggle to deal with the problem. They will fall into endless bickering, blaming each other rather than focusing on the problem, and arguing over whose fault it is. Or they will become so overwhelmed by the terrible event that has occurred that they will draw apart from each other into their own silent, individual worlds. They will each face the difficulty alone and in doing so they will be more likely to break up.

Other couples and families will spend very little time or no time at all in blaming each other or withdrawing. The vast majority of their time will be invested in figuring out how to work together to rise above their difficulties. These successful families will not be asking, "Who is at fault here?"

Rather, they will be asking the question, "How can we help each other grow and become stronger as we face this challenge together?"

We all deal with stress differently, but the difference between success and failure in hard times depends on asking the right questions and then seeking steadfastly to find the right answers.

Strengths Protecting Couples and Families During Hard Times

If a couple and a family have developed several important strengths in their relationship, they are more likely to succeed in the face of difficulties in life. We have seen that strong couples and strong families in America and around the world share six interrelated, major qualities. How can these strengths be used to help them through hard times?

- ***Appreciation and Affection.*** Under stress and during a crisis, people who have an abundant reserve of appreciation and affection for each other are likely to seek shelter in each other's arms, band together, and care for each other when the going gets rough. Without this vast reservoir of goodwill toward each other, many of the crises couples face in life would be simply unbearable.
- ***Positive Communication.*** If a couple is in the habit of talking in a kind, gentle, and supportive way to each other, when hard times hit they will not be as likely to fall into a downward spiral. By practicing positive

communication when life *is* going well, a couple is immunizing their relationship for protection when life *does not* go well.

- ***Commitment.*** Couples who have a well-developed feeling of commitment toward each other are, by nature, more likely to weather hard times. Because of this commitment, they do not have to worry about the future as much; they can be confident the other person will be there when needed.
- ***Enjoyable Time Together.*** We all seek shelter in a storm, and a couple who has always enjoyed being with each other will naturally look to each other for a warm, loving, and comforting place to be until the storm blows over. Just hanging out together, as we commonly say today, is essential when life gets hard.
- ***Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values.*** Countless people seek spiritual solace in hard times. The solace is found, for many, in the community of a church, a mosque, a synagogue. For many others a sense of hope, optimism, and joy in the face of difficulty is found in nature, in prayer, in meditation, in connection with something greater than oneself. There are myriad ways this sense of connection and consolation is found. And a sense of peace is found at home in the comfort of each other's arms.
- ***The Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively.*** Strong couple and family relationships, by their very nature, are resilient and resourceful. It is important to remember that everyone deals with stress a little differently. And that is okay! Don't try to make the other person deal with stress the way you do; just understand that we don't all handle situations the same way. Couples who are gifted in managing stress in life have a wide variety of tools available to them.

Research by the late Reuben Hill, a pioneer in the field of family studies at the University of Minnesota, showed that it is not just the stressor event but the interaction of the event with a family's strengths, the resources family members can tap, and how they think about the situation all combine to determine how severe the crisis becomes in their lives. This helps us better understand how some couples and families rise above the trauma they face, while others sink.

Severe Couple and Family Problems

Some problems demand intervention and help from outside the family. These include alcohol and other drug problems, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, mental health issues, disabilities, and major illnesses. Couples and families simply cannot solve these problems by themselves and need to seek insight and support from professionals in the community. Skilled support from trained volunteers working in countless support groups can also be especially helpful.

Preventing Major Problems in Life

If we strive every day to nurture and develop our couple and family strengths, we will lead happier, healthier, more satisfying, and more meaningful lives. The strengths we enjoy as a couple and as a family will be a wonderful immunization against the inevitable stressor events and crises that occur in everyone's lives.

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

Resources

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