

## *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*

# How Couples Can Ensure a Meaningful and Happy Life Together

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Every couple and family will, at some point, face a crisis and, most probably, more than one. A crisis can test a marriage, but it also can be a catalyst for growth in the relationship. This is No. 19 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.

Even the happiest of marriages have their ups and downs. Research on *great marriages* — relationships in which the couples report that they are happy with each other, love each other, are satisfied with the relationship, and often consider themselves to be *best friends* — even in these very strong partnerships, there can be some extraordinarily difficult periods.

For example, a study conducted at Utah State University at Logan and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln focused on couples who believed that they had created a great marriage over the years. Researchers Sarah Tulane, Linda Skogrand, and John DeFrain found that more than one in four of these couples at some time in their marriage had considered divorce on at least one occasion (25 couples out of 91, or 27 percent, had discussed the possibility of divorce). What we can conclude from this is that even for many of the most successful couples, married life is not always likely to be a bed of roses.

Fortunately, a crisis in marital life together can be a catalyst for growth. Good things can come from bad situations.

But, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. There are preventive ways to strengthen couple relationships. And, in the event of a marital crisis, it is important to consider marital and family therapy and the importance of getting high-quality professional help when needed.

The difference between success and failure in hard times depends on asking the right questions and then seeking steadfastly to find the right answers.

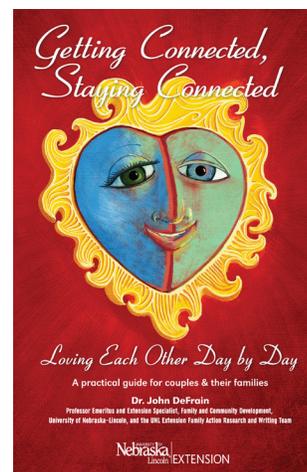
### The Specific Things Couples and Families Do Day-By-Day to Ensure a Meaningful and Happy Life Together

There have been innumerable studies of how couples and families successfully manage the stressors they face in everyday life together and how they endure severe crises when they arise. These very specific approaches to living ensure that couples and families do not create problems for themselves, and also work well together to minimize the difficulties they face when the world thrusts problems upon them:

**Strong families and happy couples look for something positive and focus on it.** For thousands of years, people have seen hard times as being both dangerous and difficult, but also full of opportunity. In a period of crisis in their life, they look for something positive and hold onto it. Counselors call this *reframing* the situation. People seek to look at the situation in a different light, from a different angle, through a different lens. This ancient Japanese *haiku*, a form of lyric verse, is an example of reframing:

*Since my house burned down  
I now own a better view  
Of the rising moon.*

**Strong families and happy couples pull together rather than pull apart.** Strong families don't see a problem as an



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](http://amazon.com).

individual's problem but as a challenge for everyone and a reason for everyone to work together. When the young wife said to her very troubled husband, "Everything that happens to you happens to me," she meant that she shared his pain, his burden, and then the joy of helping him rise above the difficulty he was facing.

***Strong families and happy couples are wise enough to look for help from others when they need it.*** They understand that some problems are much bigger, more difficult, and require aid from outside. They find help from a variety of sources: from their spouse, their parents, their children, extended family members, supportive friends, neighbors, co-workers, members of a religious community, and professionals in their community. "I'm smart enough to know that I can't fix the brakes on my car by myself. I can't do my income taxes. I can't cure my asthma, and I'll never be able to do heart surgery on myself if I need it. So, why would I think I could solve my wife's alcohol problems? These are the reasons I go to Al-Anon."

***Strong families and happy couples listen to each other and talk with each other.*** When hard times come, couples need to open up and share their thoughts and feelings. Nothing good can happen until people really start talking and listening to each other. Problems can't be fixed until they are openly discussed. And, counselors often comment that, "Anything mentionable is manageable." Meaning that if you can find the courage to talk about something, you can find the strength and ingenuity to deal with it.

***Strong families and happy couples keep things in perspective.*** One young man, Allan, gained this perspective from his grandfather, whom he remembered as a very kind old gentleman. The grandfather had been an immigrant to America, escaping poverty and misery in Russia and coming to this country to find a better life for himself and his family. Years later when Allan would get depressed about how difficult his own life was, he would think about his grandfather and all the troubles he faced: no money, scrambling to find a way to take a boat to America, not knowing the language, being beaten up in a railroad strike, being laid off of work for three years during the Great Depression, on and on and on. "If Grandpa John could get through all of these things and still be a kind and smiling man, I certainly can."

***Strong families and happy couples adopt new roles in a flexible manner.*** To continue the story, during Grandpa John's time in the Depression of the 1930s, the ideal family situation was for the mother to stay home with the children and keep house, while the father worked and brought home good earnings. When Grandpa John lost his job in the Depression, however, Grandma Lottie found a job cleaning houses for rich people in the city and Grandpa John became, in effect, a househusband. He did much of the cooking and cleaning at home and learned to enjoy taking care of the couple's two daughters. The daughters, who were young adults during the Depression, did odd jobs in the city to earn money for clothes and other expenses while they were going to school. This story demonstrates role flexibility: In a difficult situation, each member of the family steps forward and does what needs to be done. The family's problems will not be solved by one individual, but need to be solved by all working together.

***Strong families and happy couples know how to compartmentalize their worries and pain.*** In a critical time, it is

often necessary to set one's worries and sadness aside for a time and focus on basic survival. A young mother of three girls lost her husband, who died of brain cancer at age 37. Money was in short supply so she was forced back into the workplace. She was terribly lonely, having lost the best friend she ever had in life, but she knew she had to keep going for the sake of her daughters. "So, I would tough it out. I'd go to work and smile and work efficiently and effectively. And I'd come home and fix dinner and help the girls with their homework. I'd get them to bed and then I'd crawl into bed myself and snuggle up with the photograph albums full of pictures of Alex and all of us. And I would cry myself to sleep, night after night." This continued for many months until one evening, "I forgot to cry." But she remembered to cry the next night and several nights after that. And then, a night came again when "I forgot to cry." And her emotional life started to move along in a happier mode. She still misses Alex, but is doing well in life and the girls are happy. She did not run away from her pain and loneliness. She did not try to mask it or bury it along with her husband. Rather, she recognized her genuine despair and the fact that she had a right to feel that way. But instead of letting the despair overwhelm her, she put it in a manageable box: She faced each day with strength, and ended each day honoring her husband and the pain she felt from losing him.

***Strong families and happy couples eat well, exercise, love each other, get adequate sleep, and nurture their spirit.*** In stressful times we often make the mistake of working harder rather than being wiser. Difficult times in life are debilitating physically and emotionally, and the no-pain-no-gain approach is not the answer. Pushing-pushing-pushing leads to physical and emotional breakdown, pure and simple.

During stressful times, it is especially necessary to do all the important things we already know we should do:

- Eat well-balanced meals — and eat these meals together as a couple/family.
- Exercise routinely.
- Love each other and keep emotional bonds strong.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Reserve some quiet time as an individual to nourish one's spirit.

***Strong families and happy couples create a life full of meaning and purpose.*** Everyone faces severe crises in life. Some crises can be avoided, while others are inevitable. To be best prepared for these hard times that will hit us all, it is important to be creating a useful life of service in our family and community. This brings a richness and dignity to our lives. It strengthens us and gives us hope during the troubles we are forced to endure. Karl Menninger, a world-renowned psychiatrist, would commonly tell distressed individuals at his clinic in Topeka, Kansas, that he recommended they find good things to do in life. Rather than spend all their time feeling sorry for themselves, he would tell those who were clearly capable of doing so, "Go across the tracks. Go where people are hurting and in need and find a way to help them so that their burden is lessened." Menninger's strategy of helping others often brought comfort to the helper.

***Strong families and happy couples actively meet challenges head-on.*** Troubles are like cars. They don't usually fix themselves. But oddly enough, people often waste a lot of time thinking that health problems, money problems, relationship

problems, whatever problems they face, will somehow fix themselves. Though on rare occasions this seems to happen almost magically, most problems need active intervention. Couples need to work together with confidence to meet the difficulties they face. Sometimes it is important to withdraw for a time from the source of the storm. Spend some time hunkered down, rest, and replenish ourselves, which is different than running away from our problems. It is simply rebuilding our strength so we can come back stronger and wiser.

***Strong families and happy couples know how to go with the flow to some degree.*** In the face of many crises in life, human beings are relatively powerless. The loss is so great and the challenge is so daunting that a family or couple may recognize that they will not be able to resolve the crisis. In light of these overwhelming disasters that we are sometimes forced to confront, we must learn to simply, “Let go, let God.”

***Strong families and happy couples are prepared in advance for the challenges in life.*** The best preparation we know of is to grow and nurture healthy couple and family relationships. Our love for each other is like money in the bank: If we have kept our relational accounts in order, we will be able to weather life’s difficult storms by helping each other. As parents, nurturing the couple relationship as well as the family relationship becomes a model for the children to follow as they grow up in the family. Parent strategies include caring for one another in the family and commitment toward family members, especially in difficult times. Modeling behaviors strengthen couple and family bonds in both challenging *and* calm times, and are examples that children can draw from to prepare them for handling challenges in their own adult relationships.

***Strong families and happy couples know how to laugh and they know how to cry.*** An observation of strong families is that they are fun-loving. Couples and families who enjoy life together enjoy a good laugh. They don’t laugh *at* each other or at other people. Putdowns and sarcasm are not demonstrations of a person’s good sense of humor; rather, they are evidence of anger and bitterness. People in healthy relationships laugh *with* each other about life’s crazy twists and turns. And they are not afraid of tears, which cleanse the body of stress-related biochemicals, giving a person a feeling of genuine relief. Women who say they just had “a good cry” know what they are talking about.

***Strong families and happy couples do not blame others for their fate.*** They do not react to crises as victims. They don’t spend their time in retrospect, saying, “If only he/she had done this or tried that . . .” Instead, they work with others to build a more satisfying world for all by taking responsibility for their own actions.

***Strong families and happy couples take life’s challenges one day at a time.*** One woman who was in very desperate circumstances after her daughter died, said that for a while, she literally took life one minute at a time. “It was hard even to breathe. I was so broken.” Today, with the help of her husband — who also needed her love and support — and the

help of countless other loved ones and friends, she is healthy, happy, and alive.

***Strong families and happy couples realize that suffering can be a catalyst for positive growth.*** Several years after her daughter died, this same woman looked back and saw quite clearly that the crisis of her daughter’s death was actually a turning point in the life of the couple and the family. Crisis, by definition, is a turning point. In her case, the loss of her child led to growth and change in her life. Her marriage was strengthened as she and her husband focused on helping each other survive the death. She found new purpose in life as she subsequently went back to school and became a nurse, working with young people who have medical conditions similar to those her daughter had. The couple — whose marriage had been drawing apart — was brought back together during their daughter’s illness. Once again they became best friends and were very connected to each other emotionally.

***Strong families and happy couples identify spiritually with the grand procession of life.*** Strong couples and families are well aware that as individuals, we are very small, really quite insignificant, in the grand scheme of things. But we are all connected — the past, the present, and the future — to something much bigger and more important: to life itself. Feeling small as we look into the Grand Canyon and see layers of rock that date back hundreds of millions of years can actually be quite satisfying and soothing to think about. We are but a drop of water in the ocean of life.

Couples and families do not have to be victims in life. There are countless useful and effective things they can do together to rise above the difficulties they face.

**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.

## Resource

Tulane, S., Skogrand, L., and DeFrain, J. (2011). Couples in great marriages who considered divorcing. Logan, UT: Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development, Utah State University. For more information, contact Dr. Linda Skogrand, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist: [linda.skogrand@usu.edu](mailto:linda.skogrand@usu.edu).

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