

Couples' Best Strategies For Managing Stress

For Immediate Release

Relationships give our lives meaning, and in tough economic times our marriages and families are more important than ever. But with the economy struggling and home values dropping, how can we manage stress and still stay close to the people who matter the most?

Psychologists at the UCLA Relationship Institute have studied this question, and with Valentine's Day upon us, they have identified five of the most effective ways that couples can manage stress in their relationship – without tearing each other's hair out.

1) Get Stress on Your Radar. Make no mistake: stress is potent. Stress affects us physically, and it can leave us feeling depleted and more short-tempered than usual. As a result we are more likely to criticize our partner, exaggerate flaws in our relationship, and bicker more. To make matters worse, stress is invisible and easy to overlook. Partners in healthy relationships know how to recognize stress, and they make allowances for it. Know the ways your partner shows stress, and when you see those signals cut him or her some slack.

2) Step Up. When your partner feels overwhelmed, it's time to do more: drive the kids, go to the grocery, cook dinner, pay the bills, whatever. But be careful about taking credit for your good deeds. If you crow about how helpful you are, you can make your partner feel worse, not better, because you are sending the message that your partner is really not up to the task, or will owe you a favor in the future. So don't pat yourself on the back – at least in front of your partner. Just do more of what needs to get done, and take the personal satisfaction that comes with that.

3) Set Up a Firewall. Every couple experiences aggravation and frustration, and stress only makes these feelings worse. Partners in healthy relationships keep their frustrations in check, not allowing them to spill over to erode the good feelings that they have for one another. So build a firewall around all of the great things that you and your partner share, and protect them against all the minor annoyances that life sends your way. Remind yourself of all the wonderful qualities that first drew you to your partner – and make an effort to see those qualities, even in those moments when he or she is driving you nuts.

4) Get Back to Basics. Remember that good relationships are fundamentally about two people taking care of each other. Know what it takes for your partner to feel secure and happy, and do your best to give it to them – on their terms, not yours. Make an extra effort to show appreciation and affection -- even in small ways, and especially when you disagree. Regardless of how

stressed they are, healthy couples rarely resort to yelling, name calling, being selfish, or delivering ultimatums. They know that they can weather storms best when they reach out to each other.

5) Get Active. If stress is eating away at you and your relationship, do something about it. You don't expect to achieve good physical health by sitting on the couch, so don't let your relationship get out of shape either. Consider taking a class to get ideas on how to keep your relationship fresh, sexy, and energized. Make a commitment to take a walk together every weekend. If you are really struggling, get professional help; talk to your close friends or consult the yellow pages for a good therapist.

These and other suggestions for couples can be found at the UCLA Relationship Institute website, but the bottom line is this: In this economy, our relationships may be the most valuable resource we have. By learning a few simple strategies, all couples can master stress and even grow closer through these difficult times.

Dr. Thomas Bradbury and Dr. Benjamin Karney are professors of psychology at UCLA and co-directors of the UCLA Relationship Institute. They are available for on-air interviews on February 13th and 14th. Contact Dr. Bradbury at Bradbury@psych.ucla.edu or (310) 825-3735.

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