



### **Communication Under Stress – A Resource For Couples**

Stress is a normal part of life for most people, causes can range from the insignificant ‘niggles’ to major issues that can bring a couple to breaking point, with seemingly no way of moving forward. When a couple reaches out to seek professional help, it is vital that they are prepared to deal with the difficulties in different ways to those that they have been using so far.

A couple’s stress may be a result of different communicational styles, differences of opinion (does it REALLY matter who is right?), different values, temperaments, or whether alcohol or drugs are used. Stress may also be compounded by personal perceptions of the situation (it is so unfair! I am sick and tired of this! WHY won’t he/she understand?) and of your spouse’s behaviour (she/he is always only doing xyz, they NEVER think about me/ my needs!)

If your relationship is under stress for whatever reason, it is important to be aware of this (consider whether there is an increase in arguments, ill feeling, resentment, sadness). Two stressed individuals will spark off each other and may reach a point of such conflict that they shut down as a means of self-preservation and simply walk away from the situation/ relationship. Consider where your ‘breaking point’ lies. Also, consider where your partner’s may lie. You are two very different people, with different needs – are you meeting each other’s needs – do you even know what these needs are?

It is essential to explore what is going on for both individuals. Remember, there was a time when you could not wait to be together, so much so, BOTH parties CHOSE to commit to each other ‘till death do us part or similar’ – however, during the romance period, the hard parts of a relationship were far from consciousness. Ask yourself, what has changed from the ‘in-love’ period to this ‘brink of war’?

These same difficulties, the hard part of making the relationship work, are now very much the centre of the issue. It is important to note again, that ALL couples argue – you are after all two **different** individuals, with different life experiences (good, bad and ugly). You have fears, hopes and expectations from your relationship and for your life. Often there are thoughts that look like this: **this** will be different, she/he loves me and will treat me right, I am NOT going through THAT again, etc. Such expectations and thoughts are very normal, after all every individual wants ultimately to live happily, in love and in peace.

Past experiences (that heavy excess baggage) can insidiously destroy the present. Consider how much of your past is still (very) present for you? Ask perhaps, why your past is with you now, what role does it play in your world – if you think protection from hurt, think again. Often holding onto the past masks or distorts the present – like wearing sunglasses, the beautiful aqua sea, green forests, blue sky, etc., all look orange! Your NEW partner is NOT your old partner. If you allow them, they will show you this in many ways. Comparing our partners to our past relationships is a guaranteed method to alienate them; remember no one like criticism, and no one likes to be compared to someone who you feel negatively towards. What is that saying about your feelings towards them? Similarly, expecting your partner to behave in a selfish/ hurtful way will inevitably cause this situation to occur because you may have already judged and sentenced them so why should they bother with keeping on trying?

Remember IF you are expecting them to mess up, you may be very ready to criticise, judge and get very angry if they do something you **perceive** as being targeted towards you because you have already primed yourself to expect the worse. Would you perhaps be prepared to think the best about your partner? Could their behaviour be because they are tired, weary, unaware of their behaviour, dealing with things you are unaware of yourself? Are you prepared to think positively even if they are indeed being self-centred, for whatever reason – try to gently point out what they are doing and how it affects you. Your partner is NOT your past, no matter how much they remind you of that ex you would rather forget. To compare them to the one that hurt you is insulting and damaging to this new, fresh start and to yourself.

### **Danger Signals**

All couples argue, disagree and bicker. However, incessant disagreement and bickering is like swimming with a shoal of piranhas, every remark, hurtful comment and ‘dig’ is like taking chunks out of each other’s very soul. Remember the pain of negative comments/ disagreements is often perceived as an indictment of one’s whole being. Disagreements are a normal, healthy part of any relationship – they allow challenge, growth, change and ultimately a smoother, happier relationship. However, when a couple disagrees to the point of constant war, resentment builds and causes each to fight hard for their own rights ultimately leading to an inability to communicate without conflict.

Highly stressful situations (e.g. working shifts, being a single parent, working away, having other childcare arrangements/ responsibilities, studying and educational commitments, etc.,) can lead to increased arguments often catalysed by a perception of injustice ‘I am doing ALL the work, he/she never helps!’ etc. It is this ‘all or nothing’ perception that causes the majority of issues.

Consider your statements and how you communicate with your partner when you both disagree – make a note of what you say – do statements such as ‘you are totally selfish and only think about yourself’ float about often? Consider instead, HOW you feel your partner is being selfish and how (you feel) they are thinking about themselves. What is it that they are not doing for you? Try statements that take ownership – ‘I feel .... when you...’ Arguments are often instruments of mass destruction, they hide the pain we are feeling because we feel we are not being listened to, heard, taken care of, loved, nurtured, respected, etc, etc, in the way **we want or need to be**.

### **There is no ‘I’ in Us**

Irresponsibility and self-centredness – when you chose to be with your spouse, you also agreed to stop being single. Many relationships are damaged or destroyed by the spouse who insists on behaving as if they are still single. It IS difficult to factor another human into one’s life, after all when single, people do not have anyone else to consider and therefore can do as they please. However, this ‘single’ mentality cannot and will not prosper a relationship. Relationships are about compromise; about meeting half way. You cannot be in a relationship and think only about yourself. This level of self-absorption is disrespectful to your partner and to the relationship. It makes your partner feel like an object whose thoughts and feelings do not matter.

It is important to realise that when a couple is courting they are on their very best behaviour. There is romance, courtesy, respect, consideration, paying each other attention, listening, laughing, being genuinely interested in your partner, simply, you are the very best you can be. However, once the prize has been bagged, this changes almost overnight. The partner is left in a state of shock about the selfish behaviour, which they disbelieve and pretend it is not happening and so make excuses for their spouse.

Long-suffering partners often trigger withdrawal from the relationship, often after more than ample warnings about the behaviour of their spouse. Being judged, ridiculed, not listened to and abused (mentally, physically, emotionally or sexually) are certain ways of killing a relationship. Vulnerability and openness are a normal part of relationships – if you cannot be open within a relationship, then when can you be? However, in order to open up, a spouse needs to feel safe, not controlled (overtly or covertly through arguments or

sulking), bullied (belittled, ridiculed), judged (condemned), or criticised etc. Withdrawing from a relationship to protect yourself often causes more pain to both partners. It takes less energy and emotional effort to take the courage to open up than to live in the pain of self-imposed isolation. Your partner is not a mind reader; they may not readily be able to see what is wrong; help them out and communicate your issues.

### **Consider the following:**

What is causing you pain?

Make a list. Be clear – e.g. I feel angry/ hurt/ sad/ when he/she doesn't help me out with..... Write down concrete statements and OWN them – i.e. I feel xyz when a does/ does not.... rather than generalising/ blaming/ putting your partner down.

Write down as much as you can, no matter how insignificant or 'silly' it feels. Feeling sad/ hurt/ angry because of a partner's behaviour is **never** silly or irrelevant. Issues arise because your feelings and needs ARE very relevant and you want to be heard, feel and be valued. How you deal with your hurt is equally as important.

Write down what you would like to happen (be realistic here) – how do you need your partner to interact with you? Start small, what will make an immediate difference? What things can your partner work on (and how can you help them??) There is no magic wand, it will take hard work and commitment from both parties to agree to resolve the situation.

What can you 'let go' of – consider the small things that in the greater scheme of things, really do not matter. Do you have habits, ways of reacting etc., which cause more harm than good? Ask your partner to help you identify these in a safe and respectful manner (yes, asking will be difficult; however, if you genuinely want to change, then you can help each other). What are you prepared to let go of for the sake of peace? It does not mean 'anything' for a peaceful life. This is about both individuals reflecting on your own reactions to things that potentially cause greater arguments and letting them go. There are no sides to a disagreement, there are no winners and losers, and there is no need for anyone to have the last word to feel bigger than the other. Loving, respectful relationships are based on common goals and values. What do you believe in? What do you want for yourself from yourself, others, the world? What are you prepared to give in return? What is your idea of fair play? Consider making a list for each.

### **Top 5 areas of contention:**

- 1) Not being listened to – 'you are not listening to what I am saying!' Do you listen without feeling defensive or feeling that you are being attacked? Do you hear what your partner is actually saying (as opposed to what you **think** they are saying)?
- 2) Differences of opinion – can you put your opinion down and listen to your partner's for a change? Can you agree to compromise?
- 3) Anger about needs not being met – we all have needs, what are yours? How do you need your partner to help you meet these? What are you doing to meet your partner's needs? Are you perhaps doing too much and feeling resentful?
- 4) Feeling criticised and judged – your partner is not out to get you whenever they talk with you, they are often trying to share important thoughts with you and maybe get your support.
- 5) Feelings about each other's families – this is the famous punch below the belt for the majority of couples. Ask yourself what you get from demeaning or putting down your partner's family, no matter how strange they may seem to you. Such things are often an underhanded way to get at your own spouse and is passive aggressive.

### **Goals:**

The ultimate goal in communication is to learn new positive and empowering ways of communicating with each other, to change old patterns of interacting and learn to solve problems together; you are after all, a unit.

If you cannot talk without arguing, set some ground rules. Go out of the house to a neutral place that is quiet where you can both talk with and listen to the other. If things get heated take a break, and do not take offense if your partner wants a break. It is your right as a human being to be able to compose yourself.

Choose what most irritates and upsets you. A sock on the floor is not worth causing distress over. If one of you has been using alcohol/ drugs, then avoid discussing emotive subjects. It is respectful to yourself and your partner for both of you to be completely sober. It is being able to spot early warning signs that things are not quite right, and having a pre-considered plan of action to resolve misunderstanding, conflicts.

The ABC of conflict:

- Actuating – what is the cause of a conflict – ask yourself: is it really important enough to start an argument over?
- Behaviour – how do you behave/ react – what do you do when you are feeling hurt/ attacked/ unheard?
- Cognitive – what are the thoughts that cause you to feel angry and then ‘explode’

Consider an argument/ disagreement you might have had recently, ask yourself some of the questions above. Maybe write down your responses, being as honest as you can. Which of these are most important, and how can you discuss them with your partner?

### **Compromising vs. Divorce**

If you have been in previous relationships that have failed, you will know the personal, emotional and financial cost of ending a relationship. Reflect on your role in previous relationships – what worked, what did not? What traits have you brought into this relationship? Do you constantly blame your partner for problems in the relationship? Are you unwilling to take responsibility or accept any blame for these problems? How do you react when they feed back their unhappiness at the situation? Whatever the issue, it can be resolved if both of you are prepared to be open, mature and civilised about addressing the ‘brokenness’.

### **Children**

Children are the hidden, invisible victims of a couple’s disintegrating relationship. Young babies and children can be significantly affected by unrest in the home. Whilst a young child may not understand the nature of the issues occurring, they are highly sensitive beings who pick up on the tense, negatively charged atmosphere. Youngsters who have some comprehension may show signs of withdrawal from normal activity, or become more challenging – they are terrified of your behaviour and are frightened that they may be rejected and abandoned by you. Older children and teenagers are often used as pawns by the adults in their squabbles and to get at each other. This can cause lasting emotional impact for the child in how they perceive the world and people around them, including how they form relationships in later life. Consider your own parent’s behaviour and how it has affected your ideas about life and relationships.

If you must disagree/ argue, please be aware of your proximity to your child. A couple’s inability to function ‘normally’ is not the child’s fault or responsibility. NEVER use a child to get at an absent parent no matter how angry you are or how justified it feels. The only message the child will be receiving is that you are blaming them and holding them responsible for the state of your relationship.

### **Resources that may be of interest:**

Bancroft, L., (2003), **Why Does He Do That? Inside The Minds of Angry and Controlling Men**, Berkley Publishing Group

Chapman, G., (1994), **The Five Love Languages for Married Couples**, Moody Publishers

Chapman, G., (2005), **The Marriage You’ve Always Wanted**, Moody Publishers

Chapman, G., (2006), **The Five Love Languages – MENS EDITION**, Moody Publishers

Chapman, G., (2004), **The Other Side of Love – Dealing with Anger**, Moody Publishers  
Cloud, H., and Townsend, J., (1992), **Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No**, Zondervan  
Cloud, H., and Townsend, J., (1999), **Boundaries in Marriage**, Zondervan  
Harley, W, F., (2008), **His Needs, Her Needs – Building an Affair-Proof Marriage**, Monarch Books  
Lindenfield, G., (2000), **Managing Anger**, Thorsons Publishing  
Simon, G. K. (2010), **In Sheep’s Clothing: Understanding and Dealing With Manipulative People**,  
Parkhurst Brothers Publishers Inc

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