

► Exercise: The Stress-Reducing Conversation

Instructions: The purpose of this process is to assist couples in the management of daily external stress, stress that comes from OUTSIDE the relationship, like job stress.

In this exercise you will discuss a recent or upcoming stress in each of your lives like an upcoming job deadline, or a future event (outside of your relationship) that may prove stressful. Each of you will have take turns as a speaker (about your own stress) while your partner listens.

The motto, “Understanding First, then Advice,” means that emotional connection should be honored before moving to problem-solving. Empathy with emotions and problem solving are like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: they fit together, and each is invaluable.

Speaker: Talk about your stress with as much detail and depth as possible.

Listener: Offer support to your partner using the methods listed below. Be sure to avoid problem solving unless your partner wants your help doing so. Just do your best to listen and understand your partner’s thoughts and feelings. Remember: Understanding First, Then Advice

Giving Support Means:

- **SHOW GENUINE INTEREST:** Maintain eye contact. Ask questions.
- **BE AN ALLY FOR YOUR PARTNER:** Show empathy.
- **COMMUNICATE UNDERSTANDING:** What a bummer! I’d be stressed out too.
- **‘WE’ AGAINST ‘OTHERS’. DON’T SIDE WITH THE ‘OTHER’:** Even if you agree with the enemy, empathize with your partner’s emotions. Focus on what your partner is feeling, not what your partner is perceiving.
- **SOLIDARITY:** This is our problem and we’ll face it together.
- **PROVIDE AFFECTION AND COMFORT:** Come here and let me hold you. I am totally on your side.

Share Emotions:

- **INTEREST:** Tell me more about that. Ask questions.
- **EXCITEMENT:** Wow! This is really hot stuff! Let’s do it!
- **SADNESS:** That’s so sad.
- **FEAR:** That is something that would have me worried too.
- **IRRITATION and ANGER:** I can see why you’d be annoyed here.
- **DON’T:** Stonewall; Ignore your partner; Fail to respond; Get Defensive, Criticize.

Don’t side with the enemy.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PARTNER:

First, ask your partner, "Do you feel understood yet?"

1. If she or he answers "No," then ask questions to help increase your understanding:
 - a. What is most upsetting to you about this?
 - b. What is it that you don't like about this situation?
 - c. What is the worst thing that could happen in this situation?
 - d. What is this like for you?
 - e. Is there anything I can do to support you in this?
 - f. What do you need?

2. If she or he answers "Yes" and does feel understood, then ask "Are you interested in receiving advice or problem solving?" If the answer is "Yes," then move onto advice and/or problem solving suggestions. See if your partner has ideas before suggesting some ideas of your own.

REMEMBER

There is no such thing as an "over reaction" emotionally.

Try not to judge your partner's emotions.

It would be great if you could commit to having a conversation like this one for about twenty minutes at the end of each day. Write here how you and your partner have agreed to build the Stress-Reducing Conversation into your daily schedule.