

Dealing with Stress in Relationships

13 Self-Help Suggestions

© 2013 by Susan M Stasek PsyD & Deah Curry PhD

Families and friendships go through conflict. This is a normal part of being related and in relationship.

When times are tough or when there are extra pressures on any individual within a relationship, things shift. Depressions can deepen, anxieties may rise, and aggressions and frustrations get unleashed, causing serious emotional frustration and difficulties in communication.

Good Relationships Survive Arguments

Healthy, grounded relationships with strong emotional bonds can survive some periodic arguments, hurtful misunderstanding, and prolonged tension. Various friends and family members will have different coping styles, and if you can be aware of theirs and yours, it will help you give yourself and them what each needs to get through the rough times. Other ways to survive include:

1. Allowing Some Space. It may take a period of distance or silence to allow anger to cool. When things get heated, take a break whether that's just to count to ten or for a few days or even weeks to let the emotion dissipate. Then complete the argument when you can see the other person's point of view and hear their complaints with an open mind.

2. Moving On. Make a mutual agreement to forgive and forget. Not every fight is really worth winning or even finishing when it's damaging the relationship. Acknowledge that you didn't like or appreciate what occurred that stirred things up, apologize for your part in creating the problem, take an honest look at how you could have acted differently or said things in a more gentle way. Then let it go and move on.

3. Developing Better Skills. Sometimes it takes a commitment to learn and use more empathy and better communication skills. Not everyone learned how to fight fair and make up when they were kids. Some of us learned to lash out in self-defense, others withdraw and suppress feelings until they explode in unrecoverable resentments. You or your friend or family member may need to develop new skills in handling the impulse to wound with words, or retaliate with destructive actions. If so, it's time to seek the help of a therapist.

Often what causes tension in relationships in the first place is heightened stress. This will happen during holiday seasons when expectations are often unrealistic, but it will also happen at others times, such as during

chronic illness, sudden changes in job or financial security, or even normal life transitions such as getting married / divorced, having a new baby, moving to a new home, etc.

Taking Control of Personal Stressors

When you feel your own stress levels rising, it's helpful to let that be a signal to slow down, take stock of what's necessary, and incorporate one or more of these tips:

1. Know Your Limits and Live Within Them. Whether it's saying no more often, or setting a ceiling on spending money or limited time, pay attention to how you use your energy and resist using it out of guilt. Do only what your heart and spirit are really joyful about doing.

2. Take Even Better Care of Yourself Than Usual. In periods of stress, it's important to maintain daily health routines. Getting the rest, nutrition, exercise, and hydration the body needs strengthens our ability to tolerate small irritants. If you have to get less sleep, or skip meals or workouts in order to have time for activities that are inherently stressful, you're not taking good care of yourself.

3. Believe in Your Essential Goodness. Many people are driven to take on more stress than necessary out of an erroneous belief that if they don't they will be seen as bad, flawed, uncaring, or mean. Allowing guilt, fear or anticipation of others' disapproval to dictate how we use our energy is an act of giving in to a tyranny of toxic assumptions and dysfunctional expectations. If you are caught in this trap, start telling yourself that you are a good, kind, and caring person and that doesn't change if you decline an invitation, or refrain from communication for a while.

4. Redefine, Reschedule, Resist, and Renew. Stress can be managed well by redefining priorities, rescheduling anything that doesn't have a critical deadline, resisting the impulse to "fix" others, and saving yourself enough time and resources for personal renewal.

5. Give in a Meaningful Way. Our over-commercialized society pressures us into thinking we must buy, buy, buy to appropriately give or show we care. But mindless spending makes for meaningless connections, and leaves us feeling empty, dissatisfied,

stressed out, or worse. Finding a meaningful way to show your affections, and giving to others what makes an important difference in their lives will strengthen your relationships.

Ending Toxic Relationships

A toxic relationship is one in which you are continually emotionally abused, feel unsafe or discouraged in being fully authentic, or are disempowered and left unable to get your psychospiritual needs met. Attacks of criticism and ridicule that come out of the blue are difficult to defend against in effective ways, much less in a loving manner. Hiding who you are in order to not be a target in social settings sends stress through the roof.

Toxic relationships do not have to be endured, no matter who they are with. We don't have to put up with cruel, sarcastic, disapproving, abusive behavior to keep the peace. If you are in such a relationship, give yourself the gift of severing ties with such people, if not permanently, then at least for a while. Here are a few ways to do that:

1. Decline to attend family gatherings that include abusive, critical, or shaming relatives. You do not owe anyone an explanation for choosing to keep healthy boundaries. Celebrate holidays, special occasions and enjoy weekends with friends or alone, instead.

2. Be clear, explicit and firm about your limits. Say "I can come to dinner only on Tuesday, and will need to leave by 9 pm." Keeping your own boundaries puts more control in your hands, and lowers stress levels. Reinforce your limit setting by reminding yourself that you have done a good thing for you and you don't have to feel guilty about holding your boundaries.

3. Use the old broken record technique to enforce your right to your own decisions. Repeat as necessary, "I'll be at Tuesday's dinner, but will be leaving by 9 at the latest...I'll see you at the dinner, and I'll be ending my evening by 9...Even though I will be leaving before 9, it will be good to talk to you at Tuesday's dinner." Resist others' attempts to talk you out of what you know is best for you.

4. Start stress-free traditions with friends, co-workers, neighbors or others who are not toxic. Traditions are just culturally laden habits that segments of society or family groups practice together. Decide with a new group of people what is meaningful and celebratory. Make up your own holidays and special occasions for fun, and friendship bonding.

5. Take a relationship break; operate alone. When your world is crowded with toxic relationships, sometimes the best thing is to withdraw from all of them for a few months – or even for a few years. Spend the time exploring and nurturing your own spirit, dancing to your own drumbeat, and creating your own life free from constant reactivity and need to defend yourself. Tune in to the natural world, journal, create, take a trip. Follow your own quest for meaning and be really conscious about what you choose to allow into your life.

Dealing with stress in relationships requires forethought, effort, and perhaps a bit of courage. The key is to let others own their own feelings about your need to take care of yourself, and for you to be mindful about how you manage your energy.



In her psychological services practice, Dr Stasek specializes in helping parents, couples, adults who want to age gracefully and law enforcement officers with stressful personal lives. She is located in the Northshore area of Chicago. Call her for an appointment at 815-828-4795, and see her website at www.DrStasek.com

Dr Curry retired after 20 years as a psychotherapist in the Seattle area. She now coaches women -- exclusively by phone across the US, Canada and other English speaking countries -- who want to end self-sabotage and yearn to create a soul-satisfied life. See her website at www.DeahCurryPhD.com

