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803 Work Wanted

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Commentary...

Protecting your marriage in stressful times

By Norene Gonsiewski, MSW, LCSW
 Guest Columnist

By now, most of us realize that the pandemic is not going away anytime soon and that we aren't past working and schooling kids from home. Within our own lives there is much to be stressed about and when we turn on the news, it's all doom and gloom. All this uncertainty is a recipe for relationship disaster. If you feel like you've been walking on eggshells around your partner, you're not alone.

It doesn't have to be this way, though. You can even use this time to put your relationship first again. I know, you have little time to yourselves, but you can use it wisely. Happy couples are ones who reduce the stress and increase the connection.

Turn off the news and listen to each other. In fact, make sure that every day you turn off *all* screens and spend at least 15 minutes checking in on how each of you is really doing. What do you appreciate about your partner? How is your mood? What are you grateful for in the midst of this mess? What are you learning about yourself right now in terms of your values, hopes and fears? There is so much to talk about right now in order to grow personally and as a couple. Partners who listen, empathize, and validate each other are more likely to feel less stressed during the pandemic.

Deal with difficult

issues constructively and in a timely manner. I imagine that there are very real issues you need to talk through. How will you handle the holidays? Is your money going to last? Can we keep this up? Respectful communication is the biggest challenge for all couples and under this enduring stress you may be shorter tempered. Don't try to work through issues in the car, standing in the kitchen or in the middle of chores. *Wait until you cool down* and then sit down and take turns listening to each other's point of view. Listen to understand, not to respond. Remember that you married someone just as smart as you and that, if you listen, you can arrive at a win-win solution. Under great stress we want to blame someone, but whatever small thing your partner did, you mustn't take your stress out on them.

Remember: getting to

spend your time at home with a loved one is a privilege. There are plenty of people out there who live alone and are forced to spend these scary times *without* a shoulder to lean on. Take advantage of your situation and spend some quality time with your partner. Make the time to relax, play a game, do a project, watch a movie, play with the kids, get outside, try a new pursuit like yoga or meditation — and don't forget your physical connection. Intimacy and connection are the ultimate de-stressors. You are lucky to have a partner to lean on, and to kiss and caress.

Laughter and humor are essential in staying happy and connected. One of the strongest contributors to relationship happiness is being able to laugh together. The humor that makes a marriage happy includes laughter at jokes, funny situations, the kids' and pets' antics, and one

another's goofy behaviors. It also includes *laughing at one another's mistakes and imperfections*. Right now, so many things go wrong and instead of being annoyed and reactive, you could choose to laugh off the small things. Couples who can laugh when one of them forgets to do a chore, drops a carton of milk, or burps in public are also able to use humor to *reduce the small stresses of life*. These couples can also show appropriate humor in moments of greater stress in order to connect with their partner and subtly reassure each other — it's a way to say, *"we will make it through this."*

Your relationship has never been more important, nor more stressful. Like anything important it takes time to maintain it. You can rise to the challenge to come out of this better at making one another feel safe, appreciated and close.

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