

Managing stress together: Guy Bodenmann's '3 Phase Method'

The following exercise is based on Guy Bodenmann's 3 Phase Method of couple coping. It is designed to help you to find ways to support each other to cope with the stresses and strains of life and therefore to improve your relationship.

Before beginning the exercise it is worth recognising that stresses come in different forms. Some stress is *internal* to the relationship, that is, it relates to things that one partner either does, or doesn't do, that the other finds stressful. Other stresses are *external*, that is, they come from outside your immediate relationship. An example of an internal stress is resentment at someone not contributing to household chores. An external stress might relate to work or to other family members. How your partner manages an external stress might become an internal stress if it directly affects the relationship.

Stresses can be *acute*, that is they arrive suddenly and often unexpectedly, or *chronic*, that is, they persist for a long time. An acute stress might be an unexpected redundancy; a chronic stress in contrast could be long-term doubt and uncertainty over the future of a job.

Stresses can also be *major*, that is they have a dramatic impact and far-reaching consequences, or they can be *minor*, what we might call *daily hassles*. A major stress might be losing your house, whereas more minor stresses might include daily child-care issues or a chronic health complaint.

The ways couples cope with stress can be *positive* or *negative*.

Positive couple coping strategies can be *supportive*, for example offering practical help, emotional support, giving encouragement or expressing solidarity; *common*, for example joint problem-solving, joint information seeking, sharing of feelings, mutual commitment, or relaxing together; and/or *delegated*, for example where one partner takes over a new task or role to support the other partner.

Negative coping strategies can be *hostile*, for example support that is accompanied by disparagement, distancing, mocking, sarcasm, an open lack of interest, or that minimises the seriousness of the partner's stress; *ambivalent*, when one partner supports the other unwillingly or with the attitude that his or her contribution should be unnecessary, and/or *superficial*, for example support that is insincere, such as asking questions about the partner's feelings without listening, or supporting the partner without empathy.

The ways that couples react to stress can vary according to the type of stress. For example an acute, major stress, such as the death of a child, can either break apart a couple or bring them closer together, depending on how they deal with the tragedy.

For many couples it is the minor, chronic stresses, or daily hassles, that can grind down a relationship. When couples cope poorly with these types of stresses it can lead over time to a reduction in positive, caring behaviours and an increase in expressions of anger or withdrawal. The consequences can be to lose a sense of warmth and togetherness, and instead to feel resentment, isolation, and loneliness that can culminate in separation.

The following exercise is designed to help couples learn to deal collaboratively with chronic, minor stresses through providing each other with support and encouragement. In turn that makes life's hassles feel more manageable and less overwhelming because you don't feel that you have to deal with them on your own.

The 3-phase method of offering support

Guy Bodenmann describes a 3-phase method of offering support. Each partner takes it in turn to take either the confiding role or the supportive role.

Exploration

In this first phase the confiding partner identifies a minor stressful experience that happened outside the relationship (i.e. something that's not about your partner).

Taking about 15-30 minutes the confiding partner then tells the supportive partner about the experience following three guidelines:

- Describe the concrete aspects of the situation (what happened)
- Focus on the thoughts and emotions you felt at the time and afterwards
- Try to understand why the situation was so stressful i.e. what was it about it that touched a raw nerve.

The supportive partner listens to the confiding partner following three guidelines of his or her own:

- Listen actively, pay attention, use body language that shows you are paying attention
- Summarise important issues to show that you have understood
- Ask open-ended questions to get more information about the effect of the stressful event e.g. what was it about it that made you feel so upset?

Support

In this second phase lasting about 10 minutes the supportive partner offers more direct support through:

- Offering emotional support in the form of empathy (e.g. 'that sounds awful'), understanding (e.g. 'I can see why that got to you at that time'), and reframing (e.g. 'I wonder whether there's another way of looking at the situation?')
- Offering practical support, if appropriate (e.g. is there anything I can do that would help?)

Feedback

In the third phase, lasting about 5 minutes, the confiding partner tells the supportive partner:

- How satisfied he or she was with the support that was offered
- What else would have been needed to feel better and to cope more effectively with the stressful situation

At the end of phase 3 the partners swap roles and go through the three phases again.

References

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- Randall, A. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2009). The role of stress on close relationships and marital satisfaction. *Clinical psychology review*, 29(2), 105-115.