



RELATIONSHIPS

Making Time to Talk With Your Partner

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Introduction

You rush home from a long day at work. You pick up the tired, hungry kids at childcare. You throw coats, bags, and shoes into the living room. You plunk the kids down in front of the TV and rush to the freezer to see what you can find to throw together for dinner in a hurry. In the meantime, your partner arrives from work after picking up dry cleaning and stopping at the bank. Your partner silently starts looking through the daily stack of bills and mail.

You cook dinner and eat, wash dishes, prepare for the next day of work and school, and bathe the kids and put them to bed. You and your partner collapse on the couch with glazed-over eyes and exhaustion. You want to talk with your partner about your feelings about work and life, or about each other. But you are exhausted, and it's already 10 o'clock. This hardly seems the time to start a conversation.

Does this sound familiar? Relationship enhancement researchers have some good news for you! Spending quality time on your relationship and your partner can have a positive impact on how well you manage the other stressors in your life.

Couples who have regular, meaningful conversations with each other seem to manage challenges that life throws at them. Those conversations also help partners remain emotionally connected. These conversations with your partner can provide you with emotional support. Even when you are not overwhelmed with the demands of day-to-day life, meaningful conversations with your partner are like putting money in the bank. You are creating and storing fond memories that can be a positive resource for dealing with future challenges.

So, it's a smart move to make these conversations a habit. Use the time that you already spend with your partner and build in time that includes meaningful conversations. Here are some suggestions to help you establish such a habit with your partner.

Set aside time each day to talk with your partner

At least 15 minutes is necessary for a meaningful conversation to take place. You have schedules for many other things in your life. Isn't your relationship just as important as those other things?

- Find a time that works well for both of you to have a conversation.

- Consider combining the conversation with an activity you already do daily – going for a walk together, cooking dinner or cleaning up together, or having a cup of coffee together in the morning before the day gets busy.
- Make the conversation the central activity of the time. Don't try to do other things that will distract you.
- Some questions to ask yourself: What is the best time of day to have a conversation with my partner? Where is the best place to have this conversation?

Establish a routine

Follow your routine each time.

- Find some aspects to keep the same for each conversation. For example, sit in the same room every time, play the same kind of soothing background music, light candles, or have coffee or a snack.

A question to ask yourself: What routines do I find soothing and calming that will help me focus on my partner and my relationship?

Reduce distractions

Try to focus on each other.

- When you have children, focusing on each other may be a challenge. Try to choose a time when the children can be involved in something else while you and your partner talk, or set aside time to talk after the children go to bed.
- Turn off the television.
- Let voicemail pick up phone calls, and silence or turn off cellphones.
- Find a space in your home that allows you to feel calm and focused. Stay away from a place that will remind you of other things you need to do. For example, having the conversation in the kitchen right after dinner may not work well. Dishes that are piled up and food that needs to be put away could be distracting.
- Find a time that works that can be devoted to your relationship. Try to clear your schedule of other responsibilities. Make sure you are not worried about being late for work, and make sure you are awake and not sleepy.

When it's your turn to talk

- Each of you should think about topics that you want to talk about.
- Decide which topics feel most important to you.
- Keep in mind that both of you may have different topics that feel important.

- Make sure there is time for both of you to talk and to listen.
- Let your partner know that it is important to you to know when he or she is doing well.
- Avoid blaming or criticizing during these conversations.
- Tackle problems as a team, viewing them as "our problems."
- Consider if you are expressing complaints effectively or just criticizing your partner. The fact sheet *The Art of Complaining*, HHS-746-W, can help you determine if you are complaining or criticizing.
- A question to ask yourself: What are some likely topics for each of you in these conversations?

When it's your turn to listen

- Pay attention to your partner when he or she is speaking. Show interest by asking questions until you understand. Examples of questions to ask: How did it go? How did you feel about that? What else happened today? What would you like to do next?
- Check in with your partner to clarify that you understood correctly.
- Let your partner know that you understand. For example, you might say: I can understand why you feel stressed. It sounds like you are worried.
- Listen for when your partner expresses emotions. When you hear emotions, reflect them back. Maybe when your partner talks about something that happened at work, you can tell he or she is angry about it. You can show that you are listening by reflecting back with statements such as: It seems like you're angry about what happened. You sound angry and frustrated.
- Show support by expressing affection physically and verbally.



Decide which routines work or don't work

- Try your new routine for a week or two. Then talk about how it is working.
- If it is working well, keep it up! Reward yourselves for the investment you have made in your relationship!
- If you are not happy with something, talk about how you could change it. Remember that it is important for both of you to be happy with the arrangements. Find solutions that are good for both of you.
- Ask yourself questions that help you review the routine — for example, is the time and place working out for you?
- Consider adjustments that you may need to make – for example, adjustments to your schedule, kids' bedtimes, or the time that you go for a walk with your partner.
- Are there things you want to add to the conversation ritual that will make it better?
- What is your partner's experience like in these conversations?

Routines can keep you connected

Routines you complete with your partner can be helpful in keeping you connected to each other. These help you know each other better and share what is going on in your lives. You will learn about the things that each of you are dealing with, your joys and challenges, and your feelings about your relationship. Routinely having meaningful conversations can be a source of support, positive memories, and emotional connection in your relationship.

Activities to help you have conversations

The following exercises/activities will help you start thinking about how to implement the suggestions and strategies from this fact sheet.

- Make a list of the times of day that you really like to talk and connect with your partner.
- Make a list of places in your home or elsewhere that you find soothing and comforting, and where you would like to have your relationship conversations.
- Make a list of the distractions that you would need to reduce or eliminate so you can have a relationship conversation with your partner.
- Make a list of things you would like your partner to do to show that he or she is listening to you and being supportive.
- Make a list of things you could do to let your partner know that you are listening and are being supportive.

- Make a list of topics that you would like to talk to your partner about during the relationship conversations.
- Make a list of possible challenges you might encounter in making relationship conversations a habit and a list of ways to deal with those challenges.

Online resources**www.gottman.com/**

The Gottman Institute: Researching and Restoring Relationships. Website provides information on John Gottman's research on couple relationships, media resources, books, workshops, and training for the public and for professionals.

www.smartmarriages.com/

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. Website provides information on strengthening marriages and on marriage-related issues such as domestic violence, and effective communication.

www.aamft.org/

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Website provides links for professionals on issues related to family and couple relationships. Provides information on resources, current issues, and professional development opportunities.

References and resources

- Gottman, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
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- Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.M. (2010, Third Edition). *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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Successful relationships with an intimate partner require nurturing and attention. There are no quick fixes or fast-track methods to satisfaction and happiness in a long-term relationship. Most strategies for enhancing your relationship require repetition and practice over time. Six fact sheets from Purdue Extension – Health and Human Sciences address six areas of couple relationship challenges. The information in the fact sheets is based on research by prominent marriage and couple researchers such as John Gottman, Sue Johnson, and Howard Markman.

The titles in this series are:

HHS-742-W, *Handling Conflict with Your Partner and Staying Emotionally Connected*

HHS-743-W, *Making Time to Talk With Your Partner*

HHS-744-W, *A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Relationship*

HHS-745-W, *Increasing the Positives in Your Relationship*

HHS-746-W, *The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing*

HHS-747-W, *Sharing Dreams and Goals: Creating an Emotional Connection*

These publications are available at *Purdue Extension's Education Store*: edustore.purdue.edu