

[Part 3]

Couples and Stress

Hi, this is Molly Brennan, your host for the managing stress podcast. In this segment we're going to talk about how stress affects couples. We're talking again with Nancy Ignatin, a licensed clinical social worker and employee assistance professional who helps employees cope with stress.

Nancy, can you tell us about how stress can take a toll on couples?

I'd be happy to. When you're stressed out it can affect all of the people in your life, but it especially has impact your partner. Unfortunately, our partners are often the people who bear the brunt of our stress. It's common for people to be irritable, to lash out, or to withdraw from them when they're stressed. All of these behaviors can do serious harm to a relationship over time, so it's vital that couples help each other cope with stress and learn to deal with it together.

So what can couples do to avoid some of these negative impacts?

Actually there's a lot couples can do to cope with stress. One of the first things couples need to do is learn to recognize when your partner is under stress. In the first installment of this podcast we talked about learning to recognize your own stress signs. And it's important to learn to recognize your partner's stress signs, too. That way you can start offering more support, be more patient, and take steps to help your partner through the stressful period rather than letting the stress eat away at your relationship. Over time even the best relationships can suffer if relational or personal stress is not addressed.

So that's the first thing, learning to recognize your partner's stress signs. But couples can also learn how to anticipate stressful periods, like an upcoming deadline at work or a visit from an in-law for example. Remember that even very small things can make a big difference in a stressed person's day. When you see that your partner is feeling overwhelmed, get up early and make the coffee for example or offer to clean up after dinner if that's usually his job. These little gestures are your non-verbal way of saying, "I realize you're under a lot of stress and I'm here to support you."

Unfortunately, even the most well-meaning couples still take their stress out on each other. The best antidote for dealing with these stressful periods is to try not to take things personally when your partner is under stress. If she snaps at you over something small, choose your battles. Tell yourself, "OK, she has a huge deadline at work and is scared and freaked out, I'm just going to let it go" rather than allowing it to turn into a big fight. If both people make a commitment to trying to manage their stress together couples can actually learn how to cut each other slack during stressful times and how to support each other and come closer together.

Another thing that really helps is to find ways to manage stress together as a couple. You can exercise together, even if it's just going for a walk after dinner or a hike on the weekend. Just laugh – rent a funny movie or tell your partner something funny that

happened today. Many couples even do relaxation techniques, like meditation or yoga together. No matter what you are doing to fight stress the point is that you are doing it together, and it can make your relationship stronger.

What about couples whose relationships are really under stress and they just can't find time to focus on each other or their relationship?

Couples do sometimes get into what I call a stress rut. They are so stressed out all the time, and after a few months or years of this, their relationship begins to really suffer. They don't have the time or energy to do caring things for each other to find ways to feel close again. I think that couples in this situation could really benefit from professional help. A counselor can help them identify and manage the stressors, discuss strategies and begin building something more positive for them both.

Well thank you Nancy. I want to remind listeners that there are many ways in which the program that created this podcast can help couples, including information and tips on strengthening communication skills, fighting fairly, and getting help when you need it, so I urge you to investigate the Web site or call the program for more information.