



CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship

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This lesson is designed to help participants give more attention to their marital and couple relationships. It emphasizes a process of growth and behavior change to help relationships become stronger and more satisfying. The lesson objective is to help participants understand these three key points: 1) maintaining a strong friendship with a special person is not only satisfying, but protects the relationship when disagreements arise; 2) recognizing when your partner wants to connect with you and responding in positive ways increases your connection with each other over time; and 3) managing differences takes effort and intentional behaviors to avoid damaging a relationship. If the group is interested, a final objective is planning appropriate community activities for supporting strong couple and marital relationships.

Audience

This lesson is intended for couples in long-term, intimate relationships. It also can be used to help community groups understand what it takes for successful marital and couple relationships.

Preparation

- Read through the entire leader's guide (MF3224) and accompanying fact sheet (MF3223) before you present the lesson. Try to present the lesson in your own words without reading from the lesson guide.
- Prepare yourself by thinking through people's reactions to each section and how you will lead the discussion.
- Obtain copies of the fact sheet to distribute to participants.
- Make a copy of the evaluation survey in this lesson guide for each participant. Have a pen or pencil available for each participant to complete the survey.
- Obtain a flip chart or writing board and markers to record the group's responses.

THE LESSON

Part I: Maintaining a Strong Friendship

Often people think that being married for a long time or having a life-long partner means that little effort and work goes into that relationship. Meaningful relationships require continual attention whether you realize it or not. Take a few minutes and think about a satisfying relationship you have with someone, whether it is your spouse or lifelong partner



or a good friend. What happens between the two of you to keep your friendship or relationship satisfying?

Write participants' responses on a flip chart or writing board. If you are working with couples only, you may ask couples to discuss with each other before the entire group shares. Help the group summarize and list commonalities among the answers. Key ideas might include: make time for each other, listen to each other, share everyday happenings with each other, give compliments, show your appreciation and fondness, honor each other's dreams even if you do not have the same dreams, show understanding, share similar values, build pleasant memories, disagree without harming your friendship or relationship, and be respectful to each other even in arguments or disagreements.

As you look at these responses, it is obvious that much effort goes into maintaining satisfying friendships. Keeping a friendship alive in a marriage or lifelong partnership often can be more difficult and can take more time and attention than with a friend. Look at your fact sheet and the section called **The Power of Friendship**. It lists two specific things you can do to promote a friendship with your partner:

- Share everyday happenings with each other.
- Show fondness and admiration.

Why is sharing everyday happenings with each other so important for maintaining a strong partner relationship?

Write participants' responses on a flip chart or writing board. Summarize the discussion and the section from the fact sheet by emphasizing that we do not stay the same in how we think and react to the world around us. If a partner does not know how the other one is changing, connecting and creating a strong and caring relationship becomes more difficult.

Ask the group to focus on the section on fondness and admiration. Ask them to identify reasons why this is important in couples' relationships. Emphasize that it cannot be fake or manipulative, and that true expressions of fondness, admiration, encouragement, and appreciation help a couple elevate each other to feel good about themselves and their relationship. Remind the participants that couples who get in a negative pattern with each other can be encouraged to remember past good times and how valuable they were to each other. This may help them change the pattern of negativity toward each other.

Part II: Turning Toward Each Other

Look at the section of the fact sheet on **The Power of Turning Toward Each Other**. Emphasize that when a partner is reaching out, the other one has three choices of how to react. "Turning toward" protects a relationship. "Turning away" or "turning against" make it much harder to maintain togetherness in a relationship. Use the example in the fact sheet or create one of your own to demonstrate the differences among the three options. You could ask participants to do a role play showing each of the responses and how each response might make a person feel.

Part III: Managing Differences

What often harms friendship in a marriage or close relationship is having a severe problem between the two of you that cannot be resolved and does not go away. Discuss the four final stages that either lead to separation and divorce or to living in an unhappy situation.

- The couple thinks of their marital problems as extremely difficult.
- Talking together about an issue seems useless. They never make progress in resolving the issue or learning to live with it, so each may try to solve the problem independent of the other. Nothing gets better.
- Their difficulties pull them away from each other and they start leading parallel lives, not spending time with each other, not talking to each other in meaningful ways, not showing fondness toward the other, nor sharing their everyday lives.
- They each become lonely and do not reach out to each other in good times and bad.

*Ask the participants to look at the section on **managing differences** in the fact sheet. Depending on the available time, you can decide how much discussion to allow with the suggested topics below.*

- What situations can you remember when you brought up an issue with a partner or family member at a very inappropriate time? How did the interaction proceed?
- How do you respond when your partner or a close family member brings up a tough issue by saying, "You never . . ." "You always . . ." ? How can you

introduce a difficult topic without sounding accusing or blaming? How can you be softer in your approach?

- When you want to talk about a conflict with another person, make the message short and address only one issue at a time. You will lose the opportunity to open a beneficial dialogue if your messages are lengthy and cover multiple issues. Be alert to ways you can soothe each other during a heated conversation, even a response such as "I see." Sometimes it can keep a conflict from spinning out of control. What is soothing to you during a tense conversation?
- Always be respectful even in disagreement. Avoid calling the other person names, being sarcastic, degrading the other person, or bringing up issues of the past as a way to criticize the other person. What do you consider respectful and disrespectful during an argument?
- Some issues may require setting rules about your discussion before it starts. What rules have worked for you in your couple relationship (or family relationship) when discussing difficult topics?
- If you find the discussion getting out of control, ask the other person for a time out so you can calm down and not say things you regret later. Be sure to set another time for resuming the dialogue and work at having positive thoughts about the other person, rather than dwelling on the conflict. You could get yourself more worked up during the time out if you do not force yourself to quit thinking negative thoughts about the other person and the issue between you. How does your body react when you have strong negative emotions? How do you calm your body during stressful situations?
- Be willing to compromise in ways you both can live with. This means you have to listen with an open and honest ear to his or her perspective and feelings about an issue. Compromising and letting the other person influence you helps decrease the hurt and pain so the problem does not eat away at the relationship. It also helps develop understanding and patience with each other's faults.
- Honor each other's hopes and dreams. So many problems between two people result from conflicting hopes and dreams that have not been thoroughly discussed. You may not agree with the hopes and dreams the other person has, but showing you are listening attentively may eventually open the door for more discussion. Create an example to discuss or use the following one: Your spouse wants to start a business. You know there is not enough financial backing. Your dream is that your spouse will be satisfied with a regular job. How can you show

respect and interest in the spouse's hopes and dreams, even though you may think the spouse is not being realistic? Allow a few minutes for discussion. Two key points to summarize the discussion are: 1) listening attentively and respectfully when the spouse wants to talk about this hope and dream; and 2) encouraging dialogue so the two of you can understand each other's point of view.

Part IV: Helping Others in the Community Build Strong Relationships

What can you do in your community to help and support strong marriages and relationships? After identifying some potential activities, what steps do you need to take to make them happen? *Discussion will vary with the type of participants and what they feel is important. These suggestions might help the group begin to identify activities that would work for them.*

- Offer volunteer babysitting to young couples in the community so they might have a date.
- Establish a volunteer babysitting bank for working parents who have a sick child.
- Write Dear Abby or local advice columnists about how relationships can be strengthened by focusing on one or two ideas in this lesson.
- Work with other groups to organize relationship classes for couples in different stages of life.
- Ask a local radio station to broadcast a Tip of the Day for strengthening marriages.

Summary

Relationships take hard work. Having satisfying relationships is more than sidestepping conflict. Healthy relationships thrive in an atmosphere where each person feels comfortable talking honestly and openly about things important to him or her. In this way, minor issues can be discussed before they become big issues that can damage the relationship. Just as importantly, a satisfying relationship is about having a sense of connection to the other person. It is about spending time with the other person and talking about each other's hopes and dreams. Establishing rituals that connect partners to each other is important as well. It can be as simple as saying good-bye in a special way in the morning as you go your separate ways or making a brief time for each other to share the day's events at the end of the day.

To Be One With Each Other

What greater thing is there for two human souls,
than to feel that they are joined together to strengthen
each other in all labor, to minister to each other in all sorrow,
to share with each other in all gladness,
to be one with each other in the
silent unspoken memories.

By George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans)
(edited version)

CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship Evaluation Form

Directions: Please answer the following questions; however, completing this survey is voluntary. You do not have to answer every question. You will not be identified with your answers in any way.

1. How do you rate this lesson?

Check one: Excellent____ Good____ Average____ Poor____ No opinion____

2. Do you think this information will be useful to you in your own life?

Check one: Yes____ No____ If yes, how?

4. What did you learn that you did not know or that surprised you?

5. What have we left out in this lesson that you feel should have been included?

6. Will you share this information with others? Yes____ No____ If yes, check those that apply:

FCE____ Other organization____ Family____ Friend____ Other____

7. A. Are you?: Female____ Male____ B. What is your age?____ C. Are you?: Single____ Married____ Single, living with partner____ Separated or divorced____ Widowed____

Other comments about the lesson:

Thank you! Please give this survey to your lesson leader. The information you provided will help us improve family life education. If you are interested in being contacted in the future on the impact of this lesson on your marriage or relationship, please provide the following: Name_____

Address_____ Phone_____ Email_____

For Leaders Only:

Leader's Name:_____ Phone Number or Email:_____ County:_____

Type of group: FCE____ Other_____ Date when lesson was given:_____

Number of people attending:____ Number of Men:____ Number of Women:____

*Please return completed surveys to your county/district Family and Consumer Sciences agent, or mail directly to: Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Kansas State University, 343 Justin Hall, 1324 Lovers Lane, Manhattan, KS 66506
If questions, contact Dr. Olsen at colsen@ksu.edu.*

Thanks to the following persons who reviewed this lesson:

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References available upon request.

Publications from Kansas State University are available at:
www.ksre.ksu.edu

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MF3224 August 2015