

COUNSELLING RESOURCES: ISSUES YOU MAY BE FACING

RELATIONSHIPS

PARENTING

TRAUMA

DEPRESSION

RELATIONSHIPS

Given the busy lives that so many of us lead today, maintaining and building healthy relationships can be a challenge.

We've found that **people working to build strong, healthy relationships often face similar challenges** including learning to deal with conflict within a relationship, trying to find more time to be with a partner, learning new ways to keep a sexual relationship alive, and more.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT WITH YOUR PARTNER

Relationships with the people we care about the most can often be the most challenging. Many people find that, during an argument, they end up saying things to their partner that they don't mean, leading to feelings of guilt and regret. As a result, many are afraid of even talking to their partner out of fear of starting another fight.

One thing that's important to remember is that **conflict is a normal part of all relationships. Learning how to resolve conflicts and differences of opinion is a must for any relationship to flourish.** If you and your partner are still committed to your relationship, it's important that you both acknowledge that this is a problem that must be addressed. It's more than likely that somewhere along the line, communication between the two of you has gone off track and you should take your share of the responsibility in order to work things through.

If you are unable to work things through, it is important to get professional help. Unresolved conflict may lead to physical and/or emotional abuse, emotional damage to your children, marital breakdown and separation.

FST counsellors will explore your situation with you individually or in marital/couple counselling as appropriate.

FEW IDEAS ON HOW YOU CAN START THE PROCESS:

- Pick a time when things are calm and the two of you are relaxed and in reasonable spirits. Picking the right time is the first step.
- Explain that you really care about the relationship and you are unhappy that the two of you are arguing more than you would like.
- Explain that you want things to be different and you are willing to help make them different. Ask your partner if he/she shares your perceptions of wanting to reduce conflict and make conflicts serve a more productive purpose.
- Make a pact to stick to the issue when there is a difference of opinion and make every effort to avoid personal attacks or discussing outside issues.
- Try to understand your partner's point of view even if you don't agree with it. Repeat what you are hearing back to your partner to see if you are hearing it accurately. Everyone feels the need to at least be heard.
- If you find that you are getting nowhere, and the tension is escalating, agree to set the issue aside for a while taking a time out. Set up a time frame to return to discussion i.e. 1 hr-24hrs..

FINDING MORE TIME TO BE WITH YOUR PARTNER

No relationship is maintenance-free. **Couples who want their relationship to succeed have to be willing to work at it on a regular basis.** Couples today, as a result of their heavy workloads at home and at work, are left feeling tired, burnt out, guilty, rushed and frazzled. Many are also so stressed out and tired at the end of the day that they don't feel like doing much more than watch TV.

There are, however, a number of things that you and your partner can do to spend more time together.

HERE ARE A FEW OF OUR TIPS:

- **Pick a quiet time when you are both in a fairly positive mood** and sit down with your partner to find out if he/she is feeling the same way. If so, state that you value the relationship and that you want to work on it.
- **Review some of the fun times that you've had over the years** and get your partner involved in remembering and describing them. Try to draw out as much detail as you can about the good times.
- **Take and inventory together** of what has changed since then.

- **Try and find a starting point.** Focus on one of the fun things you used to do together and problem solve to figure out what you have to do to make room for that fun thing then try doing it again.
- **Make sure to tell your partner how you feel when you do have quality time together - share your good feelings about it.**

HOW TO KEEP YOUR SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP ALIVE

Many couples find that after 5, 10 and 15 years of marriage they just don't seem to be having the same "*sexy feelings*" that they used to when they were dating or when they were first married. Often couples find that one partner wants sex more than the other.

Even healthy and successful relationships go through periods where sexual activity is not what it once was. Caring couples address this issue together and try to prevent awkward feelings from building up. Many sexual problems in relationships are not medically based but have to do with stress, communication and trust issues.

If you think there may be a medical issue, arrange to discuss it with your doctor.

Doctors are trained to discuss such matters comfortably. If you don't feel comfortable discussing it with the doctor you have now, consider trying a different doctor.

Sex is a sensitive topic for many of us because most of us were raised to view it as a topic people don't talk about openly. Despite this, sex is an important part of most marital relationships and it requires communication to keep it enjoyable.

IF YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE ENOUGH TAKING THE INITIATIVE OF BRINGING UP THE SUBJECT WITH YOUR PARTNER, HERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU MIGHT TRY:

- **Pick a relaxed time** when you have some privacy and time to talk.
- **Find out how your partner has been feeling about the subject.**
- **Try not to open the discussion with a complaint.** Most people are very sensitive about their sexual life and their sexual performance.
- If it feels tense and awkward to discuss sex, **be honest with your partner and say you find this difficult** but you care a lot about the relationship and you want to help make your sexual relationship more rewarding.
- **Share thoughts about what might be happening.** For example, have you both been tired and over committed with work or family? Are you both in good health?
- **Try to do whatever it takes to get some private time together,** time when you are not both exhausted. A weekend away is ideal but having someone take the children for a night is great too.
- **Discuss reconnecting with your partner on a romantic level** with less physical emphasis.
- **Try and be more open with each other** about what feels good and try to say more about what you like and less about what you don't like.

DEALING WITH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

EXCERPTS FROM "SEPARATION AND DIVORCE" PAMPHLET PRODUCED BY CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Most people going through separation and divorce go through a whole range of intense emotions: sadness, anger, hurt, fear of an uncertain future, loneliness, confusion over the many decisions you must make, and a sense of failure at your lost plans and dreams.

How you choose to handle a separation is very important because of the effect it will have on the rest of your life. If you do not deal with the pain you will be unhappy for a very long time. Let go of your bitterness and anger.

Try to look at the separation as an opportunity to re-examine your abilities, your assets and your dreams, and to make the changes necessary for a new, full and rewarding life.

THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- **Talk to someone you trust.** Talking and sharing your deepest concerns to a family member or close friend that you trust can give you an outlet for your frustration and anger. You may find that a person who has been through a separation or divorce is the best one to offer support.
- **Keep a familiar routine for yourself and your children.** It is especially important for your children: the more their world stays the same, the better they will be able to cope with the changes they will have to make.
- **Keep the lines of communication open with your children.** They need to know that they are not losing the love and support of either parent, and that they are not responsible for your separation or divorce. Talk openly to them about your new living arrangements.
- **Stay healthy.** You may find yourself forgetting to eat regularly and staying up late worrying. This could lead to a loss of energy and illness at a time when you most need to be on top of things. Keep yourself in good health by eating regular meals and getting enough sleep. You should also try to get regular exercise.
- **Learn some methods for coping with stress.** There are many good books you can read on coping with stress, and you may also find some information on relaxation techniques helpful. Check with your local library and bookstore.
- **Keep in mind the old saying, "One day at a time".** Deal with your separation and the unexpected problems and feelings it creates by asking yourself, "**WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TODAY?**". Try not to worry about things you cannot do anything about until next week or next month. When the time comes, deal with them just like the others - one day at a time.

- **Avoid making major decisions until your life has become more settled.** Although some decisions have to be made quickly, such as housing and school arrangements for the children, you can put off many decisions until "**THE DUST HAS SETTLED**". Give yourself some time before moving to another community, deciding on a career change, going back to school or getting involved with someone new.
- **Allow yourself the time you need to heal.** Your family and friends may encourage you to "**CHEER UP**" and "**GET ON WITH LIFE**" before you are ready. You must take whatever time you need to heal. Losing a marriage, no matter how difficult it may have been, still causes wounds. Give yourself quiet times alone in which you can think, cry, or simply be by yourself.
- **Get professional help when you need it.** You will face many legal and emotional problems along with separation and divorce, and you will probably need professional help. For legal matters, seek the help of a lawyer. If you are experiencing severe emotional stress, your family doctor can help you find a counsellor. You may also find it helpful to talk to a member of the clergy for your religion. Make sure you use these services when you need them; ignore the desire to "**TOUGH IT OUT**" on your own.
- **Look for support in your community.** There may be workshops and self-help groups in your community which can help you in this difficult time.

PARENTING

HOW TO COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH YOUR KIDS

Being able to communicate effectively yourself is one of the most important factors in having a good relationship with your children. Good communication, which involves both listening and talking, not only keeps the doors open between you and your child, it encourages them to let you into their world.

LIST OF EXERCISES THAT YOU CAN TRY AT HOME TO HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY:

- **When you are having a conversation with your children, listen with full attentiveness.** Make direct eye contact and face them directly with your body. This lets them know that you are interested and listening.
- **When you are speaking with your child, use words that are non-judgmental.** This will encourage them to open up to you. Make sure, when doing this that you try not to interrupt them or offer your opinion.
- **Use gentle, probing questions** to learn what your child is thinking and feeling, e.g. *"What was that like for you?", "How did that feel?", "What was the best part of your day today?"* or *"How did you figure that out?"*
- **Reflect the feeling content of your child's message back to your child** so they feel understood, e.g. *"You seem frustrated."* or *"Sounds like you're angry (hurt, disappointed, upset, etc.)"*
- **Show mutual respect** by accepting your child's feelings and ideas and by using an attitude that is non-judgmental, e.g. *"Sounds like that was pretty scary - tell me more."*
- **Reassure your child with empathy by seeing the world through their eyes,** e.g. *"I'm sorry you had such a bad day."* or *"How exciting for you that you were chosen Group Leader."*
- **Talk with your child about common interests** like fishing, cycling, TV programs, games, food, holidays, family members and friends.
- **Use "I" messages.** "I" messages are blame-free messages about your positive feelings and about what bothers you, e.g. *"I feel pleased when you are so helpful."* or *"I'm upset that you came home late without calling."*

- **Find something genuinely positive to say to your child** as often as possible, e.g. *"I like the way you ..."*, *"You've really worked hard on"* or *"You have a good sense of humour (a gentle way of playing with the cat, a nice way of sharing with your sister)."*
- **Consider appropriate timing for important conversations** with your child when you are not rushed, calm and not distracted by other pressures.
- **Avoid using negative labels, sarcasm or words that ridicule.**

PREVENTING AND LIMITING CONFLICT WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Fighting within families is a common problem. However, living in the "war zone", where kids are fighting on a regular basis, often leaves parents feeling tired, stressed out and wondering whether their children's behaviour is somehow their fault.

Parents are always looking for new ways to get along better with their children and to decrease fighting. The following are some tips to help prevent and limit conflict with your children:

USE POSITIVE DISCIPLINE AND OFFER GUIDANCE THAT TEACHES YOUR CHILDREN THE RULES AND VALUES OF LIFE AND HOW TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEMSELVES:

- **Establish and preserve a loving relationship with your child.**
Show your child love, trust and respect everyday (i.e. give hugs, pats on the back, spend undivided attention time with each child, respect child's feelings). Have fun together and enjoy each other's company.
- **Establish a "child-friendly" home with reasonable routines and clear expectations** appropriate to the child's age and temperament.
- **Recognize when your child is being good and trying hard.** Reward him with compliments or praise about his behaviour and efforts.
- **Plan ahead, especially in times of transition or when you are anticipating additional stress.** Explain in advance what needs to happen; involve your child in planning, help him/her to cope with change; be aware of child's strengths and limits.
- Don't sweat the small stuff: **know the difference between a mountain and a mole hill.** Especially with teenagers, choose your battles carefully.
- Offer choices, and within reason, **allow children to make mistakes.** This is how they will learn.
- **Be aware of your stress levels.** Know your own limits and avoid being pushed beyond what is tolerable. Practice self-care.

WHEN YOU'RE SEEING RED - GUIDELINES TO HELP YOU COPE

It's not uncommon for parents to reach points where they become extremely frustrated and upset with their child or children.

The following are a few ways to help you keep your cool when you're "seeing red:"

- **Avoid acting in the heat of the moment.** Tell your child you're feeling angry, frustrated and upset and that you need to take a break from the conflict to calm yourself down. Then do it!
- **When you are taking a break from the conflict: physically turn away and if you need to, remove yourself to another room, or activity.** Always make sure that you tell your children what you are doing and why. Use relaxing, calming thoughts that help you cope. Start by thinking something like *"Relax now, you can manage this"* or *"It's time to calm down."*, etc. and switch your attention to your breathing. Take natural deep breaths - breathe in and out to release your tension.
- **Have your child take a "time-out"**, in which he or she can practice self-calming.
- Sometimes, **instead of a time-out a child may need a "time-in"**, which is special time alone with a parent sitting quietly together.
- Consider the following as a model for fair fighting: **explain to your children that although it's ok to get mad, what we do in angry moments can be a problem.** Look for ways to show your child examples of good conflict resolution including how to express concerns and feelings calmly without yelling, and how to negotiate and find a solution. Encourage kids to think for themselves and work out their own conflicts.
- **Be patient - change does not happen overnight.** Small steps in a positive direction are what count.

HOW TO FIND MORE QUALITY TIME WITH YOUR KIDS

As a result of heavy workloads at home and at work, many parents today are feeling burned out and exhausted at the end of the day. Parents report feeling like they have no energy or time to spend with their children and, as a result, many parents feel guilty that they don't spend enough quality time with their children.

WE CAN'T LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD BUT WE CAN GIVE YOU THE FOLLOWING GREAT IDEAS ON HOW TO ACTUALLY FIND MORE TIME FOR YOUR KIDS:

- **Have "no TV and computer" nights.** This time can be spent talking and participating in activities that the whole family will enjoy. Refuse to make your TV and computer a central part of your recreation time.
- **Do family chores together.** Family then becomes a team working toward common goals.

- **Remember** that **ordinary daily activities** such as walking and reading stories together are as important as special trips and holidays.
- **Find time to talk about your child's day**, either in the car, on the way to soccer practice or during bath-time.
- **Tell your child about your day.**
- Plan ahead and allow extra time for big changes in your family's life. Changes could be anything from a move to a new house, a new baby or a parent who will be away from home for an extended period of time. Smoother transitions mean children who are happier and parents who are less stressed out.

TRAUMA: REMEMBERING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

When first remembering a traumatic event it is common for survivors to experience flashbacks. Flashbacks are intense recollections of the event, in which the person feels flooded by feelings and images so real, it seems like the event is happening right now. Sounds, sights or smells of the event may feel present.

You may also be experiencing some of the following: nightmares or bad dreams, high anxiety, changes in your sleeping or eating patterns, difficulty concentrating; trouble with memory, extreme shifts in moods and emotions, sadness and depression, suicidal thoughts, difficulty with intimacy, as well as with trust in relationships. You may be feeling more than your share of anger, shame, or guilt, and lowered self-confidence.

If you are experiencing flashbacks or any of the symptoms listed above, it's important to know that any and all of these reactions are normal, given what you are going through. Also know that with the right kind of help, these symptoms will gradually become more manageable before they subside. There are a number of things that you can do, on your own, to deal with these feelings. There are also many people and resources in your community that can support you through this time.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF THROUGH A SERIES OF FLASHBACKS

If you are experiencing flashbacks, you are probably feeling like you have been thrown back into a past time and another place. You may also be feeling like you are the age you were at the time the trauma occurred. If this is so, you may be feeling all of the sensations and emotions you felt at that time.

Fear and terror are often a part of a flashback, particularly since it is usually very difficult to stop a flashback once it's started. In order to manage a flashback, you must find a way to reconnect to a safer place in the present.

THE NEXT TIME A FLASHBACK BEGINS, IF YOU CAN REMEMBER, OR SOMEONE ELSE CAN REMIND YOU, TRY THE FOLLOWING GROUNDING EXERCISE AS RECOMMENDED BY YVONNE DOLAN:

- find a safe, comfortable spot
- take a few deep, slow breaths
- look around and name five things you see, five things you hear and five things you physically feel
- then go back and name four things you see, four things you hear, and four things you physically feel
- then three, two, and one
- if the memories still continue, start at the beginning with five, then four, etc. until the flashback subsides

HOW TO TALK ABOUT A TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD EVENT

Although there is benefit to talking to others about your feelings and memories, it's important to make sure that you're ready. Ideally, when you first tell someone, you should get all of the support that you need.

If you decide to disclose, only do so with someone you feel safe with and who you are sure is understanding. If there is no such person in your life at this time, seek out a counsellor who will provide a safe place for you to talk about your feelings and help you prepare to disclose to other people in your life now or in the future, as you see fit. Consider speaking with a counsellor who is trained to help people, like you, work through their situations and move on with their lives.

MANAGING YOUR ANGER

People who have lived through the trauma of abuse often have stores of anger and hurt, which belong to a past time. They also may have lived around people who could not control their own anger, but used it against others weaker than themselves. The combination frequently makes one afraid of one's own intense anger. Consequently, many people try to suppress their anger about current situations.

The anger accumulates and at some point seems to explode unexpectedly. Such uncontrolled anger can be frightening and intimidating to others. It can damage relationships. For other people the anger remains silent, or gets expressed indirectly.

ASK OTHERS FOR FEEDBACK ON WHETHER OR NOT YOU APPEAR ANGRY

Because so many trauma survivors are afraid of their own anger, there may be a discrepancy between how they feel, how they behave, and how they think they behave.

Start by asking others for feedback.

Do those around you see you as angry or quiet?

Do they know when you're angry?

Are they afraid of you?

Some people find that they have to find ways of letting others know that they are angry. Others need to learn how to express their anger more directly to the person who is provoking their anger; still others need to learn to control the way they express their anger.

MONITORING WHETHER YOUR ANGRY FEELINGS FIT THE EVENT

Although the intense anger seems to be provoked by a person or an incident in your current life, you may at times wonder, if its intensity fits the event. **If it feels exaggerated to you, the present anger has probably attached itself to angry feelings about a similar event from your past.** These feelings belong to another time, another place and another person.

Try to observe the signs of the rising anger. If you can, try to leave the situation, find a private space, and **ask yourself what the anger is about:**

DOES THE INCIDENT REMIND YOU OF AN INCIDENT FROM THE PAST THAT MADE YOU ANGRY?

CAN YOU SEPARATE THE TWO?

If yes, **promise yourself to deal with the old anger as soon as you have a chance** and then go back to focusing on your current situation. Ask yourself how you want to handle it. Make a decision.

CONSIDER TALKING TO A COUNSELLOR ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS

If your anger continues to feel unmanageable, consider seeing a counsellor, either individually or in a group. This will give you an opportunity to express your anger, from both the past and the present and help you learn clear, simple techniques to feel in control of your emotions.

DEPRESSION AND STRESS

Our counsellors have identified some of the key issues that individuals who are dealing with depression and stress face in their lives.

Symptoms range from feelings of sadness after a loss, like the break up of a relationship or the death of a loved one, to symptoms of more severe depression, including loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, etc..

DEALING WITH FEELINGS OF SADNESS AFTER THE BREAK-UP OF A RELATIONSHIP

Many people who experience a breakup of a relationship feel a sense of loss. During this period, many experience feelings of sadness, and may appear preoccupied and withdrawn; temporarily lose their sense of humour; may not seem very energetic and may think a lot about the past.

If you have just gone through this experience, know that there is a difference between sadness and depression. Sadness is easier to recover from than depression and it usually lasts a shorter time.

It is important that you allow yourself to experience some sadness, especially given the fact that the relationship that has just ended may have been very important to you.

- **ALTHOUGH YOU WILL RECOVER FROM THIS SADNESS IN TIME, THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SPEED YOUR RECOVERY ALONG:**

- **Be realistic in assigning responsibility for the breakup.** Relationships are a two-way street. It's important to try and learn what you can from the experience while not dwelling on it indefinitely.
- One way to avoid dwelling on the relationship is to **ensure that other things are happening in your life.** Don't give in to the tendency to stay home alone thinking and brooding over the lost relationship. Get out of your home or apartment and go somewhere even if you have to make up a destination (i.e. library, shopping, community centre, etc.).
- **Don't avoid your friends.** Although you may feel like being alone most of the time, it really isn't good for you. If you're worried about being "bad company" just remember that most friends are less critical of you than you are of yourself.
- Finally, **be patient and allow your feelings to run their course.**

LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND AND DEAL WITH SYMPTOMS OF CLINICAL DEPRESSION

Symptoms of clinical depression may or may not have been the result of an external event. Sometimes they happen all by themselves.

YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING CLINICAL DEPRESSION IF:

- it feels as if you've been miserable forever
- you don't have the energy for any of the things you used to do
- you're having trouble getting your job, school work, and/or house work done
- activities that used to interest you don't any more
- you're having trouble concentrating and making decisions
- you feel like a worthless person
- you feel like the world would be a better place without you
- you're having trouble sleeping (can't get to sleep, stay asleep, or can't wake up)
- your appetite has changed (loss of appetite or marked increase in appetite)
- you're having thoughts about suicide as a way out

If you are experiencing many of the symptoms listed above, you may be experiencing clinical depression and would probably benefit from professional help. **Depression is a very common illness and differs from sadness in that it is more severe, prolonged, and has a greater impact on your life.** Most depressions respond very well to medical evaluation and treatment, which may involve medication and counselling.

STEPS TO TAKE TO GET HELP

You might want to consider contacting your family doctor or a doctor at a clinic to explain how you have been feeling so they can determine what kind of help would be most effective in your case. Medication is often recommended in situations like yours.

If your doctor does not seem comfortable in evaluating depression (a few doctors aren't) see another doctor who is. Remember that medication is not necessarily the answer to your entire situation.

- **You may need to look at how you respond to stress, and review your coping mechanisms** - this is where counselling might come in. Most people who experience this type of depression do recover but professional help is important in speeding your recovery.
- Depression can be very discouraging and **you need the support of friends, family, and professionals to help you get through** the darkest part of this common but miserable illness.
- **If you have any suicidal thoughts or feelings, it is very important that you convey them to someone and do not keep them to yourself.** They are a strong sign that you need help. If you can't talk to friends, family, or your doctor about it, be sure to call a telephone Distress Centre (they can be found inside the front cover of the telephone book). If you are in danger of hurting yourself, go to the emergency room of your local hospital and tell the staff how you are feeling so they can help you.
- **What's most important is that you not lose hope.** One of the symptoms of depression is hopelessness and yet depression is episodic which means it has a beginning and an end. You will not always feel this way. Take steps now to give yourself a chance to get on the road to recovery more quickly.

LEARNING HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS

Whether we like it or not, stress is definitely a part of our modern world. It seems that a lot of people are living lives where they have too many responsibilities and too little time. Not only is it frustrating to feel this way - it's usually not all that good for your health.

CLASSIC SYMPTOMS OF STRESS INCLUDE:

- feeling nervous and jumpy
- exhaustion
- worrying all the time
- having trouble falling asleep
- being apprehensive
- resorting to drugs and alcohol to "settle your nerves"
- being impatient and cranky
- having difficulty concentrating
- skipping from one thought or activity to another without resolving anything

If you are experiencing any of the above, this can be a signal that you have to back off and re-evaluate your commitments and lifestyle. Modern living tends to encourage pressure, over-commitment and stress. In moderate doses, stress isn't a bad thing - it gives us the energy to perform and achieve. But in excess it can make us unproductive and threaten our health and our enjoyment of life.

If you think you may be stressed out, it's worth pausing and taking stock. If you conclude stress is harming your quality of life, you may have to do some re-evaluation of your commitments and priorities. None of us can be all things to all people. It often feels like there isn't enough to go around - sometimes we have to prioritize and let some things go undone.

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS THAT YOU CAN TRY:

- Stop and think what you do to relax.
- Exercise and physical activity are excellent ways of releasing stress, as is a healthy diet. **You might also want to consider cutting down on your caffeine intake. Coffee, tea and colas should be taken in moderation.**
- Smoking cigarettes is likely to add a health risk, **which is a high price to pay for trying to "settle your nerves."**
- Taking breaks and treating yourself well have been shown to increase productivity. **People in high gear usually burn out. People who take breaks during lunch and leave work on time usually do better. You may feel like you can't afford to take time off but you can't afford not to.**
- People will commonly dabble with drugs and alcohol to relax but in excess they are not effective **and could potentially add another problem to your list.**

