

# Empower Yourself

*Empower your relationship through  
empowering yourself*



## Objectives

- Understand the reciprocal nature of health and wellness: Our relational health affects our physical and mental health, but also cultivating individual wellness and health supports the health of the couple relationship.
- Identify strategies for creating a healthier physical living style, nurturing individual psychological well-being, and promoting sexual health.
- Aspire to engage in behaviors that strengthen relationships by promoting individual physical, social/emotional, spiritual, and sexual health.

## Background Reading for Facilitator

- NERMEM Chapter – *Care for Self: Maintaining Physical, Sexual, Emotional, and Spiritual Wellness*

## Facilitator Materials

- Sheets of paper and markers for “Stressors Crowd Us” activity
- Participant workbook materials (3 tip sheets; 5 worksheets)
- Video: *Managing Stress – Brainsmart – BBC* (2:23 min.)
- Timer for pulse count
- Relationship Wheel
- Optional: small squares of bubble wrap or “stress” balls

## Participant Workbook

- Tip Sheet: *Caring for Yourself to Care for Others* – p. 9
- Tip Sheet: *Healthy Living, Healthy Couples* – p. 13-14
- Tip Sheet: *Tips for a Healthier Sex Life With Your Partner* – p. 15-16
- Worksheet: *Signs of Stress* – p. 11
- Worksheet: *Managing Stress* – p. 12
- Worksheet: *My (and my partner’s) Strengths* – p. 17
- Worksheet: *What Went Well* – p. 18
- Worksheet: *My Action Plan* – p. 1

## Session Overview at a Glance

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| ■ Why it is important to care for self (Slides 1-3)               | 5-7 Minutes   |
| ■ Stressor demonstration activity (Slides 4-6)                    | 10-15 Minutes |
| ■ Recognizing and managing signs of stress (Slides 7 & 8)         | 13-17 Minutes |
| ■ Mindfulness practice: Partner Connection (Slides 9 & 10)        | 7-10 Minutes  |
| ■ Overview of physical, spiritual, & sexual health (Slides 11-13) | 14-21 Minutes |
| ■ Emotional health (Slide 14)                                     | 8-15 Minutes  |
| ■ Summary and action plan (Slide 15)                              | 3-5 Minutes   |

## 60-90 Minutes

## 1 EMPOWER YOURSELF



### KEY POINT

It is important to tend to our personal health needs and stressors.



Those of you who have flown have heard the pre-flight instructions to put on your own oxygen mask before helping those around you.

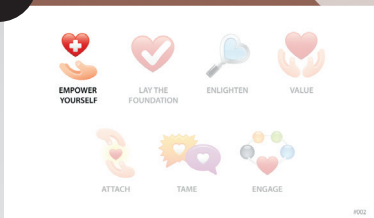
**Ask:** Why are we instructed to do that?

When we tend to our own health first, it makes us better equipped to care for others. It is emotionally challenging to be concerned about another person's health and emotions if we ourselves are not physically and emotionally healthy.

## EMPOWERING YOUR RELATIONSHIP

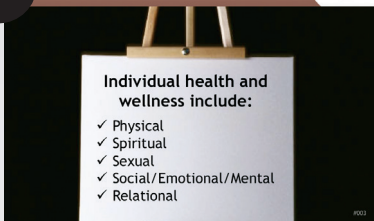
## 3-5 MINUTES

## 2 EMPOWER YOURSELF



Healthy, stable relationships not only help to produce better mental and physical health in individuals, but are also a result of better individual wellness. In other words, when we are healthy we are better able to use positive relationship skills. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can be just as influential to relationships as commitment, time, communication, and other things we invest in making our relationships work. This is the reason we focus on *caring for ourselves* first.

## 3 EMPOWER YOURSELF



### KEY POINT

Relationships not only impact our health, but our ability to "care for self" influences our emotions and behaviors and therefore, impacts our relationships.



**[Advance to Slide 3]** Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being – not just the absence of disease or illness. Here, today, we will explore the different ways individual health impacts relationship quality. Aspects of individual health include:

- Physical
- Spiritual
- Sexual
- Social/emotional and mental, and
- Relational

All of these indicators of health are connected. Yes, much of this information may not be new "news" for you. We simply want to highlight the value of self-care and discuss ways to practice positive lifestyle behaviors that lead to good, healthy practices and relationships.

Before we get started, I would like you to think for a moment about the things in your lives that “stress you out.”

### Activity (Stressors Crowd Us)

- Ask participants to write one stressor on a sheet of paper with a marker (provided). Then, ask volunteers to name the stressor they identified and come forward. Ask for different stressors so that you only have one of each stressor standing in front of the room.
- After you have a variety of “stressors,” ask for two other participants (couple) or an individual (see special note) to come forward. One facilitator should instruct the “couple” to talk about their morning or past day events.
- The other facilitator should pull the “stressors” to the side and instruct them to circle around the couple and begin whispering their stressor (e.g. “work”) to the couple. The “stressors” should gradually get louder, and compete with each other to distract the couple as they try to communicate.
- After 30 seconds, or when couple in middle stops talking or looks “stressed,” end activity and ask every to sit.

Before we process, let's see how everyone's heart is doing.

**[Advance to Slide 5]**

### Activity (Take Your Pulse)

- *Have participants take their pulse for 15 seconds using one of the methods illustrated on **Slide 5**.*
- *Use a timer and announce “start” and then “stop” (after 15 seconds pass) so that participants can focus on just counting their heart beats/pulses.*
- *On the “Take Your Pulse” log sheet in their workbook (**page 4**), have participants record pulse count (**in the next blank row**) and multiply that count by four to compute their heart rate per minute.*

## EMPOWER YOURSELF

### What stresses you out?

4



## EMPOWER YOURSELF

## Take Your Pulse

5



### KEY POINT

Illustrate how daily internal and external stressors affect one's ability to meet his or her relationship needs.



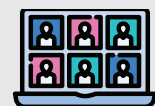
### SPECIAL NOTE

This may be a good time to provide an activity for individual (non-couple) participants. If only one single is available, one facilitator can stand in as the 'partner' while the other facilitator provides direction to the stressors.



## VIRTUAL ADAPTATION

Stressors Crowd Us – See p.105 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.



6

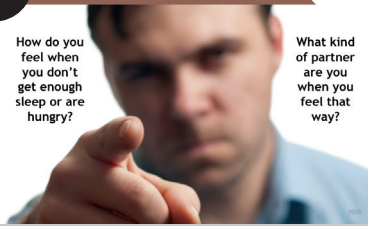
**EMPOWER YOURSELF**

Stress effects your relationship



How do you feel when you don't get enough sleep or are hungry?

What kind of partner are you when you feel that way?

**KEY POINT**

When you manage your own stress, you can be a better partner in your relationship.



I'm sure that activity made many of you feel stressed, and it likely elevated your heart rate.

**Ask:**

- *Couple:* How did it feel to be in the middle? Did you notice your heart rate elevating?
- *All:* How difficult is it to be aware of your partner's life when stress is wearing you down?
- What does this have to do with relationships?
- Think about how you feel when you don't get enough sleep, or you are hungry or stressed. What kind of partner are you when you feel that way?

Remember the heart-brain connection we reviewed earlier – stressors create a physiological response that influences our capacity to process emotions and behaviors. It is not easy to be the best partner/spouse or parent when “surrounded” or “weighed down” by so many stressors. It is almost impossible to see anyone else's perspective but your own.

One of the first steps in putting on your “oxygen mask” is knowing *when* you need to put it on.

**Ask:** How do you know that you are stressed?

*[Physical examples: headache, body aches, heart pounds and breathe fast, upset stomach, feel very tired, not hungry, want to eat all the time, muscles tighten up.*

*Emotional/mental examples: worry something bad will happen, feel helpless or overwhelmed, feel frustrated, become moody or grouchy, cannot concentrate, think people are disappointed in you, have trouble remembering things, get nervous and can't relax.]*

How easily do you recognize your (and your partner's) stress signals? To process this, let's take a look at the signs of stress.

#### Activity (Signs of Stress)

- Provide participants about two minutes to fill out their own worksheet on **page 11**.
- In addition to checking physical and emotional/mental signs of stress, encourage them to write down other “stress signals” they experience.
- When done, ask participants to discuss their responses with their partner or reflect individually if there is no partner present.

#### Ask:

- How familiar were you with your partner's stress signals?
- Did you have stress signals that your partner was more aware of than you?
- Were there ways you experience stress that were not on the list of examples?

Feeling stressed is not a bad thing. In fact, there are times when it can push us to do well or make a positive choice. Unfortunately, sometimes how we respond to stress can harm us and could hurt others whom we care about. When we feel stressed, the first step in handling our stress is to understand how it makes us feel. Now, let's discuss how we manage stress.

#### EMPOWER YOURSELF

Signs of Stress

7

How do you know that you are stressed?



#### KEY POINT

Identify and discuss with partner stress signals in self and other.



#### WORKBOOK

**Signs of Stress, p.11.**

Objective: identify the physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms of stress.



#### SPECIAL NOTE

Pay attention to participants' comfort level with sharing. Do not expect personal details, rather, try to prompt general sharing about process.



8

## EMPOWER YOURSELF

How do you manage stress?



## KEY POINT

Identify and discuss with partner healthy (vs. unhealthy) strategies for managing stress.



## VIDEO

**Managing Stress  
Brainsmart – BBC**  
(2:23 MINUTES)



Download from <http://www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php>

Original source:  
<http://youtu.be/hnpQrMqDoqE>

## WORKBOOK

**Managing Stress, p.12.**

Objective: explore ways to employ healthy coping strategies to manage stress.



## SPECIAL NOTE

Consider passing out small squares of bubble wrap (or stress balls) as a humorous connection to video. You may also want to show a humorous, brief YouTube video after processing helpful strategies.



When we are stressed, we do what we need to or can do to cope with the stress. A lot of behaviors that we label as “unhealthy” are really just attempts to cope with stress. When you are stressed, do you tend to do things that are healthy, or that are not healthy?

Let’s take a moment to watch a brief video that provides a great overview of what stress is and offers tips for coping with stress in a healthy way. [After video, allow a minute for reflection and responses].

**Video:** *Managing Stress – Brainsmart*

Clearly, we manage stress differently depending on what we find helpful. So, what works for you? How do you manage stress? Let’s explore this...

**Activity** (*Managing Stress*)

- Provide participants two minutes to fill out **page 12** in the workbook.
- In addition to checking off existing items, encourage them to write down other healthy (and unhealthy) coping strategies.
- When done, ask participants to discuss their responses with their partner.
- Encourage participants to complete “Make an Action Plan” section at home as follow up practice.

**Ask:**

- What do you think are some especially helpful strategies? [Write ideas shared on flipchart. Add suggestions as needed. Be sure to emphasize humor and laughter – show a brief, humorous video of choice if desired.]
- Did you find that you have similar strategies for dealing with stress?
- Where you differ, are there strategies that your partner uses that you feel could help you too?

During the course of the program, we will share some strategies for dealing with relationship stressors. Hopefully those practices can be of use to you as well in coping with your own stressors. As we learn these skills, and after you leave, discuss ways you can use more healthy coping strategies the next time you feel stressed [refer to “Make an Action Plan” at bottom of worksheet].



As mentioned in the video, simply breathing can help calm the body. Throughout the program we will be practicing what is referred to as focused quiet time or mindfulness.\*

Focused quiet time can have positive benefits for you as an individual and also for your couple relationship. We'd like to practice this now. The main purpose of this activity is to disengage from stress feelings and thoughts.

### Activity (Partner Connection – 2-3 Minutes)

*[Read the following instructions to the participants, pausing momentarily between each step. Leave about 1 minute after instructions.]*

1. Close your eyes and find a comfortable sitting position.
2. Just breathe normally, relax, and disengage from stressful feelings and thoughts.
3. Shift your attention to your breathing. Breathe deeply in-and-out. Do not worry if one breath is deeper than another, just focus on the breathing.
4. If your mind wanders away from your focused breathing, don't worry. Just bring your attention back to your breathing.
5. *[After 30 seconds of breathing]* As you continue to focus on your breathing, think of a memory that is full of joy or gratitude towards your partner. This memory should bring you positive emotional feelings. Stay focused on the feelings that come to mind about your partner. *[Wait a few seconds.]*
6. *[In a soft and relaxing tone]* Maintain that memory and the emotions for another minute. As you focus on this happy feeling, reach out and touch your partner. You can hold their hand or touch their knee or shoulder. If your partner is not here, you can imagine touching them or just remain focused on your memory.
7. *[After 30 seconds]* Now shift your attention to just your breathing for one more minute.
8. *[After 30 seconds]* When you feel comfortable, open your eyes and slowly become aware of your surroundings.

*[As participants open their eyes, maintain calmness in the room so that the transition out of this activity is relaxing. Keep the lights off/dim and maintain a soothing tone of voice as you take a pulse (next slide).]*

### EMPOWER YOURSELF

Mindfulness Practice: Partner Connection

Think of a memory that is full of joy or gratitude towards your partner.



9

### MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

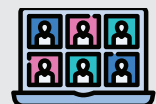


#### Partner Connection:

Allows people to disengage from draining mental and emotional reactions in the moment by shifting their attention to their breathing and relaxation. This is followed with a connection with positive memories of their relationship that brings them the greatest feelings of joy and gratitude. The focus of this practice is on changing attitudes.

*\* Certain terminology can be off-putting to some people. Mindfulness or meditation could imply a religious practice. Choose the terminology you think will be best received by your participants.*

### VIRTUAL ADAPTATION



Partner Connection – See p.106 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

10

## EMPOWER YOURSELF

Take Your Pulse



## KEY POINT

Participants will take a second pulse rating and compare it to their first one in order to see how the mindfulness practice may have helped them physiologically.



**Ask:** How did that feel? Do you feel relaxed? What was it like to focus on a positive moment?

Let's see how that helped your heart.

**Activity** (*Take Your Pulse*)

- Have participants take their pulse for 15 seconds using one of the methods illustrated on **Slide 10**.
- Use a timer and announce "start" and then "stop" (after 15 seconds pass) so that participants can focus on just counting their heart beats/pulses.
- On the "Take Your Pulse" log sheet in their workbook (**page 4**), have participants record pulse count (in **the next blank row**) and multiply that count by four to compute their heart rate per minute.

**Ask:**

- How many of you found your pulse decreased compared to your last recording on row 2A (after the "stress crowds us" activity)?
- Did it return to the rate you recorded on row 1?

Now, before we move on, take a moment to share your happy memory with your partner.

*[Provide couples at least 30 seconds to share with each other. Because this may be a private moment, it may not be appropriate to ask couples to share this memory with the group without first confirming they have agreed it is ok (per the ground rules). If you choose to ask couples to share, be sure you let each couple discuss it with each other first and agree that they are ok sharing it with the group. Remember, sharing is voluntary!]*



What we just did – focused quiet time - is one way to manage stress and maintain proper physical health. Investments in physical wellness can benefit the individual and the couple relationship. Three other areas that contribute to general physical well-being include: healthy eating, physical activity, and regular sleep. It is important to think about ALL four aspects of physical health – it is more than exercise alone. These areas overlap with other aspects of overall health as well. We will touch on the first three now, and come back to focused quiet time again later in the program.

Many of us know about the importance of eating a well-balanced diet. Today we don't have time to get into specific healthy eating practices, but we have provided a tip sheet in your workbook on **page 13** for you to review later.

**Ask:** For now, what are some social aspects of eating that can also be healthy?

Preparing meals and eating together in a positive, supportive environment with friends and family can build relationships. Having a meal plan to avoid eating out can also reduce stress on your time (and finances) and promote eating healthier.

**Ask:** What about physical activity? What are some things that you do for physical activity alone? Together?

Exercising together can reinforce your support of each other's health and lead to greater relationship satisfaction.

It is also important to get the proper amount of sleep in order to be healthy. Yes, about 7-8 hours per night of sleep is important, but it is just as important to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Sleep deprivation is associated with lowered immune system functioning.

**Ask:** How can you and your partner get on the same page around sleep patterns in order to avoid problems linked to a lack of regular sleep?

On **page 9** in your workbook are some additional tips for promoting your physical health.



### KEY POINT

Physical health and well-being includes eating well, physical activity, and good rest – all which can impact relationships.



### SPECIAL NOTE

Feel free to include additional supplementary materials focused on physical health. If additional time is available, process those materials with the group.



Also, if you (or others) offer nutrition workshops or other classes that promote physical health, share this information with the participants and encourage them to attend those workshops together.

### WORKBOOK

#### Caring for Yourself to Care for Others, p.9.

Objective: explore information about caring for self.



#### Healthy Living, Healthy Couples, p.13.

Objective: explore tips for healthy living.

12

**EMPOWER YOURSELF**  
Cultivate Your Spiritual Wellness**KEY POINT**

Sharing in spiritual health practices can strengthen your relationship.

**SPECIAL NOTE**

The intention of this discussion is not to give advice on how to create spiritual wellness, rather on getting the participants to share about their own life experience and what is working for them (strengths-based).



If teaching in a faith-based setting, it may be appropriate to include more information specific to the faith of that setting. If not, be sensitive to religious diversity in your group and non-believers.

Research that has studied thousands of families around the world has shown that one common characteristic of strong families is spiritual health. In addition, research indicates benefits for the couple relationship when partners pray for each other.

We want to acknowledge that this is a “tricky” subject to bring up for some, so we want to be clear that we are speaking from the research. We are not “prescribing” spirituality or a specific belief system; rather, our goal is to highlight spiritual practices that are shown through research to be helpful to individuals and couples. We invite you to take the messages that may resonate with you.

Spirituality or religiosity can include meditation, religious services, reading poetry in nature, prayer, etc. The key to the benefit of spirituality appears to be the positive intent towards self and other and how it makes meaning in one’s life. Different things work for each individual and couple and people are spiritually healthy in different ways by doing a diverse set of activities.

**Ask:**

- What are some things that you do individually or with your partner to cultivate spiritual wellness?
- How do you feel these practices may benefit your relationship?

Sexuality is an important part of the couple relationship. Most people report that satisfaction with their sexual relationship is connected to their overall relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction with sex is related to how open partners are about their sexual desires and feelings, how they communicated about sex, and the balance of power in the relationship. In addition, endorphins released during (mutually consensual and emotionally safe) sexual activity counter stress hormones – so sex can be considered a stress management strategy!

While this can be a highly personal aspect of your relationship, it is important to have good communication amongst yourselves. Ask each other privately if you each feel safe to share your feelings and desires about your sexual relationship. Later in the training, we will discuss ways to promote your communication, in general, that can be helpful when having discussions about sex.

It is very important that couples practice safety, avoid risks, and not pressure one another in their sexual relationships. On **pages 15-16** in your workbook there are some tips for promoting a healthier sex life with your partner. Let's take a moment to review those.

*[Take a few minutes to highlight some key points and tips from the workbook, including:*

- *Sex is not about intercourse, but the flow of eroticism between partners - make efforts to engage in (non-sexual) activities that strengthen the emotional connectedness with your partner;*
- *Most sexual encounters are not spontaneous and it is important to plan time for this important aspect of your relationship;*
- *Communicate openly about sex with your partner – discuss activities (before you have sex) that can help lead to sexual desire and satisfaction for BOTH partners;*
- *The sexual bond between partners may be at risk during key times during a long-term relationship;*
- *Maintain physical health for a healthier sex life and life in general – exercise, sleep, and eat well.]*

### EMPOWER YOURSELF

Pay Attention to Sexual Health

13



### KEY POINT

Sexual satisfaction in a relationship is related to communication about feelings and sexual desires and the balance of power in the relationship.



### SPECIAL NOTE

There may be some couples who are dealing with sensitive issues related to sexual health. Try to be sensitive when sharing personal experiences. Do your best to refrain from personal commentaries.



Also, it may be appropriate to discuss issues of sexual safety and domestic violence.

### WORKBOOK

**Tips for a Healthier Sex Life With Your Partner, p.15-16.**

Objective: explore tips for how to fit in long-term physical intimacy into our relationships.



14

**EMPOWER YOURSELF**

Support Your Emotional/Social/Mental Health



- ✓ Identify strengths in yourself and your partner.
- ✓ Notice and appreciate the good in your life.

**KEY POINT**

Identify individual strengths that can promote emotional well-being and that one brings to the relationship.

**SPECIAL NOTE**

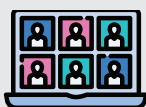
If you are implementing the program over a span of one week or more, you may want to ask participants to complete the “What Went Well” worksheet as homework and set a date when they bring it in to process their worksheet with their partner in class.

**WORKBOOK****My (and My Partner's) Strengths, p.17.**

Objective: explore personal and partner's strengths.

**What Went Well? p.18.**

Objective: identify positive experiences in their life and recognize how they contribute to those positive experiences. (For reinforcement at home.)

**VIRTUAL ADAPTATION**

What I Am Grateful For – See p.106 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

Many people assume that “things” will make them happy. Research shows that people do get happier as their income increases, but only up to a certain level.

**Ask:** So, if money and “things” do not make us happy for the long term, what does?

People who are well-adjusted tend to report greater overall optimism and positivity. Also, as you appreciate your own strengths and those of your partner, you may find greater happiness and satisfaction. Think about what strengths you bring into your relationship.

**Activity** (*My and My Partner's Strengths*)

- Provide participants three to five minutes to fill out their own worksheet on **page 17**. Have them check off their own strengths and the strengths they see in their partner.
- When done, ask participants to discuss their responses with their partner.

**Ask:**

- Did you and your partner recognize common strengths?
- Do your individual strengths complement each other?
- Did your partner see strengths in you that surprised you?
- How can you use each other's strengths to empower your relationship?

Research shows that keeping a “gratitude journal” can have positive effects on your relationship. As homework this week, and to help you continue focusing on your strengths and what you bring to your relationship, you can fill out the “What Went Well” worksheet in your workbook on **page 18**. At the end of each day, jot down at least one thing that went well. And, be sure to record what you did to make that happen. At the end of the week, share your list with each other. Discuss ways that you can continue do things for yourself, each other, and the relationship that reduce stress and bring you joy. For now, how about you brainstorm some things you are grateful for today.

**Activity** (*What I Am Grateful For*)

- Provide participants 30 seconds to write down at least three things they are grateful for in their life and partner.
- Ask participants to share this with their partner.

Taking care of yourself can be hard to do sometimes because of the busy world that we live in.

As a way to reinforce what we have covered, and to help keep you on track, you can refer to the **Relationship Wheel** provided [or refer to **page 7** in the workbook if you do not have wheels].

Ask yourself these questions on a regular basis to help self-evaluate how you are managing “self-care” and whether or not you are giving it the attention you deserve:

- Am I eating healthy and exercising regularly?
- Do I have regular sleep and waking times?
- Do I have some focused quiet time every day?
- Am I appreciating the good things in my life?
- Am I finding ways to serve and use my strengths?
- Do I look for positive meaning in my own life?
- Am I managing stress in healthy ways?

**Ask:** Of these skills we discussed...

- What are ways you currently empower yourself that you will continue?
- What is one new thing you plan to try?

Take a moment and write at least one new thing in your workbook on **page 1** that you plan to try out to promote your health.

*[As participants complete their action plan, review the flip chart listing the participants' expectations (from Introduction). Check-off each topic that was addressed.]*

### Action Plan

- ✓ What are ways that you empower yourself?
- ✓ What is one new thing you plan to try?



15

### KEY POINT

It is important to regularly self-evaluate how well you are maintaining self-care.



### WORKBOOK

#### My Action Plan, p.1.

Objective: encourage participants to document at least two new things (per module) they will try to do.



### VIRTUAL ADAPTATION

Action Plan – See p.106 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.



## NOTES

[illegible]