



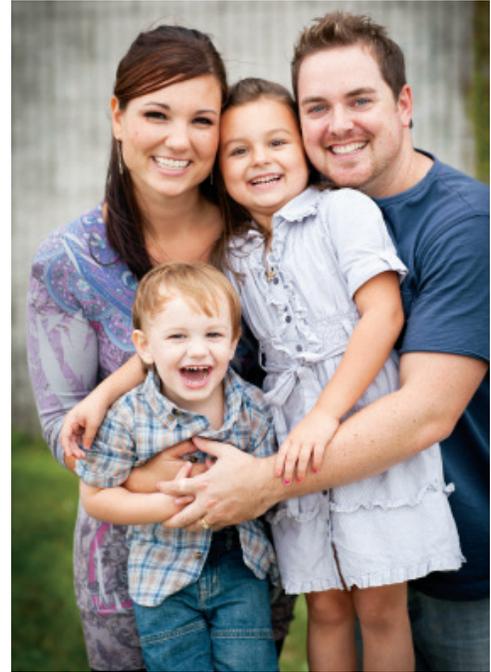
Showing Affection and Respect to Strengthen Relationships

Introduction

A healthy relationship is something that must be both developed and maintained. Great starts to a relationship are just those – great starts – and not guarantees of continued greatness. *Care* focuses on various ways romantic partners can support each other in maintaining a healthy and stable relationship. The emphasis is on things that individuals can do independently, regardless of the partner's behavior or readiness to reciprocate.

Individuals can learn to demonstrate care toward their partners through two main processes: (1) taking a positive orientation and (2) engaging in relationship-building activities. The first process emphasizes the important role of thoughts and feelings. The second process involves actions and behaviors that can strengthen a relationship.

These processes require intentional effort (see *Choose*) and practice. Taking time to develop the skills emphasized in *Care* can make a relationship stronger.



Cultivating Positivity

Cultivating positivity – both through thoughts and actions – may be one of the most important contributors to the well-being of a relationship. Happy, healthy couples engage in self-perpetuating cycles of mutual positive perceptions and interactions, which make both more likely to occur. Distressed couples engage in the opposite pattern, emphasizing negative perceptions of each other that then lead to resentful, hostile interactions (which then produce more negative perceptions).

The level of positivity versus negativity between partners and how this contributes to relationship quality can be conceptualized in two ways. First, all couples are considered as having an “emotional bank account” or “relationship account.” All partners can make “deposits” to the account by doing kind, positive things for the partner/relationship. “Withdrawals” can also be made in the form of negativity or conflict. Couples who make a conscious effort to make regular deposits to their accounts, in the form of kindness, respect, and acceptance, for example, have enough “funds” in the account to spare so that, when conflict occurs and withdrawals are made, the overall quality of the relationship is maintained. When couples don't have

What “Care” Looks Like

- Expressing kindness and appreciation
- Being open and listening
- Focusing on the good in your partner
- Accepting and valuing differences
- Giving love in the way your partner likes to be loved
- Showing appreciation
- Making time for togetherness



enough positivity in the relationship account, then even little bursts of negativity can severely damage a relationship.

Similarly, research has shown that happy, satisfied couples in stable relationships have the tendency to show many more positives toward one another than negatives. When happy couples engage in neutral, everyday interactions, like having dinner together or picking the kids up from school, they add positives (e.g., warmth, affection, validation, interest) to their “emotional bank account” that helps combat the negatives (e.g., criticism, defensiveness, anger). The key is to have at least five positive moments together for every one negative moment so when couples are engaged in conflict, they will still have positivity reserves in their “account”. Therefore, it is important to teach couples how to maintain a proper balance of positives to negatives—and keep their emotional bank accounts full—in order to sustain a satisfying, healthy relationship.

Keeping a Positive Orientation Toward One’s Partner

There are three components that can be expected in relationships: (1) Things that an individual likes about his or her partner, (2) things that an individual dislikes about his or her partner, but cannot be changed, and (3) things that an individual dislikes about his or her partner but can be discussed and changed for the good of the relationship. Of the typical 20% of things that an individual dislikes about his or her partner, the majority of them cannot be changed. In order to have a happy relationship, it is important to focus on what can change instead of what

Integrating “Care” into Child Welfare Services

- Ask clients to share happy memories of time spent with their partners, families, or foster children. Ask them to describe why the experience was positive and how their partners contributed.
- Ask clients what they love about their partners and what characteristics they fell in love with when they first started the relationship. Follow up by asking clients to recall and describe a specific instance when they felt love and affection for the partner. Encourage them to share this example with their partner when they see them next.
- Have clients identify activities they could do with their partners to help them recall positive memories and happy times spent together (e.g., looking through family photo albums, re-reading old love letters, talking about an important event).
- Have partners each make a list of actions that make them feel loved. Have them share their lists with one another so that they better understand what each can do to make the other feel more loved.
- Help clients view good things as permanent and bad things as temporary.

Why “Care” Matters to Child Welfare Services

- When parents become comfortable with demonstrating care to their partners, they may also be more likely to do so toward their children. Caring is about making a point to support and attempt to connect with those that we love. This can occur between couples, as well as parents and children. This may be an especially important skill for parents in the child welfare system to learn because many of them may have not had good role models.
- When children see their parents expressing care for one another or for a new partner, they learn how to do so themselves. The same is true for maintaining a positive perspective. Children in high risk families may benefit from learning how to care for others and focus on the positive. For example, these behaviors may spill over into sibling relations and prompt stronger bonds. Foster parents can also be encouraged to be good role models for biological parents.

cannot. Focusing on the negatives that cannot be changed can lead to a negative mindset about one’s partner and decrease satisfaction with the relationship. Focusing on what can be changed and discussing it in a healthy way can be beneficial to both partners and the relationship. Giving more attention to the good traits and calmly discussing what can be changed leaves both partners more satisfied and creates a positivity cycle within the relationship.

- **Notice and remember positive moments in the relationship.** Partners can be selective about what they choose to focus on concerning the history of the relationship. In healthy relationships, partners recount early parts of the relationship with laughter, smiles, and nostalgia, whereas in unhappy relationships, early parts are often recounted in a negative light. It is also healthy to a relationship for partners to have a high perception of one another. In happy couples, partners tend to idealize each other to a certain degree. Individuals can learn how to notice and memorialize positive experiences in their relationships. For example, displaying pictures from happy moments can help individuals remember positive times and how their partners contributed to those experiences. Developing lists of qualities they see in their partners can also help to sustain a high perception of them.
- **Think of problems as temporary and positives as stable.** Behavior can be attributed either positively or negatively (e.g., an individual can draw the conclusion that a partner’s actions were done with good or bad intentions). Holding onto cynical, suspicious, or negative views of one’s partner can weaken relationship quality. Recurrent cycles of negative appraisals, often induced by stressful situations, can lead to having a negative perception of the overall relationship, which weakens its stability and strength. There may always be things that individuals don’t necessarily like about their partners, but the key is to focus on the parts they do like, and avoid jumping to conclusions about the intentions of their actions. Or, if one does jump to conclusions about a partner’s intentions, assume that the intentions are good.
- **Show empathy or compassion.** Compassionate love is displayed by having feelings or exhibiting behaviors of caring, tenderness, support and understanding toward others especially when others are suffering or in need. Part of being in a healthy relationship involves the ability to understand a partner’s pain and show compassion. Lacking compassion in the relationship causes many couples to seek family therapy. Partners should practice showing empathy and compassion toward each other in order to sustain a caring relationship.

Engage in Relationship-Building Activities

- **Express love in ways that are meaningful to your partner.** How individuals express love and perceive love is not universal. Throughout a relationship, nurturing actions need to occur in ways that align with partner preferences. For this to occur, the importance of knowing one's partner and how he or she feels loved is necessary (see *Know*). Showing affection and appreciation in ways that are meaningful to one's partner can help strengthen relationships. Couples who understand each other's "language of love" are better able to share their love in meaningful ways.
- **Recognize and respond positively to bids for connection.** Bids for connection are any type of expression that say "I want to feel connected to you." Some individuals may miss these signals from their partner while others ignore or turn against their partners, leading to a cycle of negativity in the relationship. It is important for partners to be able to turn to each other for a connection because, in doing so, the relationship is strengthened. Partners must practice picking up on one another's cues and invitations. This may prove difficult initially, as some bids may be subtle, but with practice and open communication they become more recognizable.
- **Proactively and unconditionally show affection and appreciation.** Healthy relationships are characterized by an abundance of positive moments together in comparison to negative moments. Reciprocal exchanges of positive behavior, however, are not an indicator of healthy relationships. Keeping tabs on when positives are given received is actually a characteristic of unhappy couples. It is more beneficial for partners to unconditionally give positivity and show affection and appreciation without waiting on their partner to "earn" it.
- **Make time for shared talk and activities.** Investment of time in shared activities predicts relationship satisfaction. Strong relationships exist when both partners are aware of each other's needs for connection and respond in appropriate ways when connection is sought. If one person does not make time for the relationship, connections are difficult to develop or maintain, so it is important to make the relationship a priority and make time for it each day.
- **Support your partner during times of challenge or frustration.** Demonstrating high levels of support – such as listening to their concerns, being sensitive and compassionate, and maintaining a cooperative posture – can both create and sustain healthy romantic relationships. Partners who display emotionally supportive behaviors to one another report greater relationship satisfaction over time and when dealing with stressful situations.

Summary

Creating and maintaining a healthy relationship is a responsibility that each person in the relationship must assume. Individuals can accomplish this by focusing on the positives of their partner, showing empathy, compassion and affection toward their partner, being supportive, and recognizing and responding to bids for connection. These skills create a cycle of positivity and make deposits into the partners' emotional "bank account." These deposits help couples when they experience conflicts and hard times in their relationship. Regularly practicing *Care* sustains a happy, caring relationship.

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