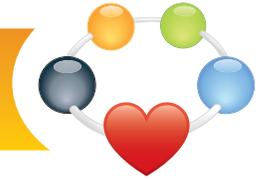




CONNECT



Engaging in a Positive Social Network to Support Relationships

Introduction

Couples live within the context of a larger community of relationships. These connections within the larger community can strongly aid in supporting and sustaining a couple's relationship over time. Couples and individuals who face challenges typically turn to the meaningful connections in their lives for support, solace, or perspective in managing their concerns. Strong relationships with others can form a collective "safety net" that provides security for individuals and couples. Belonging, meaning, and support all flow through the *connections* that we develop and share with others, including our friends, family, and community members.



The connections forged in life can lead to a variety of practical benefits for couples. First, meaningful social connections can provide a support system for couples when they encounter challenges such as loss of a job or diagnosis of a serious health issue. Second, being connected with sources of meaning beyond themselves can provide couples with differing perspectives as they look for happiness or cope with difficulties. Third, linkages to others in the community can open up a network of opportunities to give volunteer service or contribute to a worthy cause—habits that can promote individual happiness and shared meaning between partners.

Engaging Social Support Systems

Couples who experience greater social support experience higher quality and more stable relationships. Social support often improves economic, physical, and emotional well-being by offering certain resources that otherwise would not be available to individuals and couples. The sources of support can include extended family and friends, formal support services (e.g. counseling), or other resources in a couple's community.

- **Draw support from a community network.** Every couple is a part of a bigger community. Ideally, couples belong to a network of support where their relationship thrives and every couple participates in giving and receiving support. In today's world, however, couples have fewer close friendship connections, in part due to the influence of media (e.g., time spent on the Internet, watching TV, etc.) and the demands of work. It is now imperative that couples purposefully focus on devoting effort and time to engaging and building social support networks. Creating a web or safety net of support and compassion that can

What "Connect" Looks Like

- Growing and maintaining extended family relationships
- Being part of a supportive network of friends
- Engaging jointly in community organizations and service
- Identifying and celebrating sources of meaning
- Seeking out resources to strengthen your relationship

help sustain them through hard times can be vital to maintaining a healthy and stable couple relationship.

- **Cultivate positive relationships with extended family members.** In marriage, it is often said that when marrying the person one also “marries the family.” The same can be said for all romantic couple relationships.



Extended family members can be very influential on the couple by passing on expectations of gender roles, extending or limiting support for the couple, and contributing to the decisions made by couples. While at times involvement of extended family members can be perceived as interference, it is the strong, positive ties and involvement that can be a key source of strength for couples. It is crucial for couples to discuss their relationships with extended family members and decide together the level of connection they are most comfortable with as a couple. Couples can cultivate positive relationships with extended family members through time together at holidays or regular visits, or via telephone or electronic means.

- **Attend to meaningful relationships.** It is helpful for couples to have an active awareness of the relationships and social activities that are meaningful to both partners in order to sustain the couple relationship. This knowledge is the development of what is known as a “love map” or a part of the brain where all relevant information about a partner is stored. Partners who have developed an awareness of their partner’s meaningful relationships and activities are more sensitive to their partner’s needs and more supportive of their involvement in things that are meaningful to them. (For more information about this, see *Know*.)
- **Become aware of and access formal community supports.** There may be times when couples need external help to alleviate some of the problems they are experiencing. The issues can range from minor communication problems to serious mental health problems or abuse situations. In the case of less extreme issues, couples can often seek help through marriage education, couple or family counseling, or getting involved with a support group. More serious issues such as addictions, mental health, and abuse require more intensive supports or interventions. It is essential for couples to know how and where to access these support services and to utilize them for individual and relational well-being. Couples who participate in communities or activities supportive of their relationship are more likely to resolve concerns and do well over time.

Why “Connect” Matters to Child Welfare Services

- Parents who make a point to connect with other friends, family members, and people in the community are exposing those same connections to their children. When friends/family notice that a parent is struggling, they can step in and provide support to both the parent and children. Children may feel (and be) safer knowing that they have other adults to turn to in times of need.
- Getting families involved with the greater community also offers children opportunities to independently engage in activities outside of the home. These activities can provide children with opportunities beyond family life to build supportive relationships, get away from stresses, and care for others.

Being Connected to Sources of Meaning or Purpose

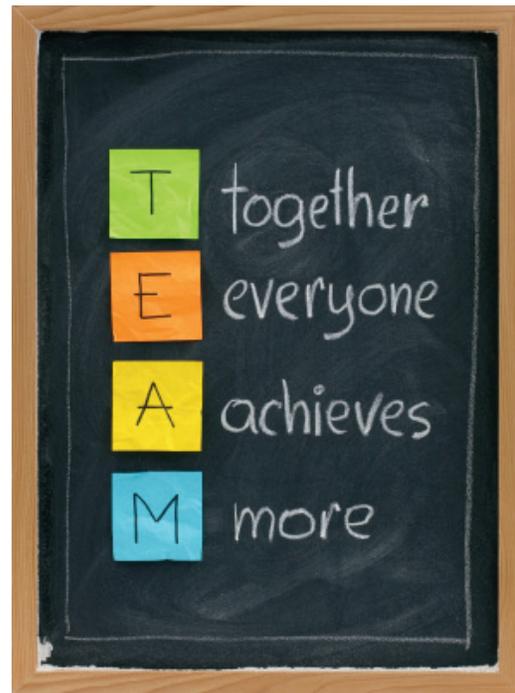
Beyond support, being connected to a larger community can instill individuals with a greater sense of meaning and purpose. Individuals begin to understand that they are only one piece of a greater whole, and that the world will not end because of challenges faced in their relationship. These larger systems of meaning can also provide couples with shared practices and family traditions that enhance their relationships (e.g., going to religious services or community events on a regular basis). Individuals and couples who see themselves as part of a larger system of meaning tend to feel more positive about their relationships and exhibit greater levels of commitment. Overall, sources of meaning for individuals or couples can help to guide their attitudes and actions, provide stability and direction, and give comfort in difficult times.

- **Connect to sources of meaning.** During difficult times, couples and individuals often turn to sources of meaning for healing and guidance. Individuals who connect with sources of meaning often rely upon such sources in making decisions about family life and interacting with a partner. Couples that decide to actively participate in faith or spiritual communities together signify that they share a common set of beliefs and this can provide couples with shared practices and family traditions that enhance the relationship. This participation also allows couples to further expand their social networks to include more couples and supports that encourage healthy, lasting relationships.

Integrating “Connect” into Child Welfare Services

- Generate a list of resources available in your community that you can use to refer individuals and couples to for additional support (e.g., counselors, marriage and family therapists, agencies offering couple and relationship education workshops, faith-based organizations). Identify barriers to accessing those resources (e.g., location, differing relationship values, trust issues, racial disproportionality) and strategies for overcoming them.
- Create and/or promote opportunities in the community that bring couples together and/or strengthen relationships and marriages. This could include offering workshops, coordinating community dance or dinner events where couples can get to know each other and build relationships, promoting awards to recognize healthy relationships (e.g., Couple of the Year Award, 40 Years Together Award, etc.), sharing Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and other community messages through local radio and printed media outlets.
- Collaborate with others within the community to organize projects or advocacy efforts that relate to the development of positive relationships. Recruit and involve couples in healthy and stable marriages from the community to volunteer as program facilitators or mentors for other couples.
- Encourage couples to do at least one activity a week focused on building their social support network with others. This might include making a visit to see extended family, going out with other couples, or getting involved in a community or faith group.
- Ask individuals or couples to map out a list of family members and friends that they can count on for support; instruct them to identify people who can contribute positively to the relationship rather than negatively.
- Have partners individually make a list of causes that they feel passionate about and would like to contribute to in some way. Encourage partners to share their lists and try to identify a cause(s) that they have in common. (Sharing of the lists could also be a time when couples get to *know* each other further.) Couples can then identify ways to jointly contribute to the cause on a regular basis.

- Pursue common purposes, interests, or goals.** Every family may not choose to participate in religious activities, however, they can still find strength in shared value systems that link them together in how they live as a family or serve in their community. Part of having a healthy relationship is the pursuit of common dreams or shared couple goals that result from a shared value system. When couples pursue these goals together they magnify the quality of their relationship while also providing them with motivation, direction, and meaning.



Reaching Out to Others and Offering Support

Just as couples benefit from the support they receive from others, they can similarly benefit from the support they provide to others. Helping others seems to increase one's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive affect, sending the message that the individual can indeed make a difference in the lives of those around them. In turn, the couple relationship can benefit as the couple sees themselves as part of a larger community and take steps to contribute to the well-being of others.

- Simple acts of service can become a source of significant strength.** Volunteering and engaging in the community has positive effects on individuals and couples. Engaging in volunteer work gives participants new skills and opportunities as well as an increased sense of personal meaning, self-worth, and control. Helping others outside of one's close family and peer group encourages individuals to act less out of self-interest and develop qualities of altruism that in turn may flow into their close relationships.
- Give social support to other couples and peers.** The best resource for giving social support to couples is usually other couples. For example, a number of successful couple education programs involve peer-to-peer networking and support from other couples. As partners work together in providing support or giving of themselves, they may grow closer and deeper in their commitment to one another.

Summary

A healthy, stable relationship involves more than just the two partners. Regardless of age, race, or income, connecting with others outside of the relationship is an essential element for a strong couple union. Through forging these connections, individuals are able to develop a community of social support, gain a sense of shared values and purpose, and assist in strengthening the individual lives and relationships of others around them. As the well-known adage states, *No man is an island* and neither are healthy, stable couple relationships.

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**HEALTHY
RELATIONSHIP
& MARRIAGE
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