



Care

Using Nurturing, Caring, and Affectionate Behaviors

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What Care Looks Like

- Expressing kindness through caring actions
- Being open and listening to your partner
- 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

Introduction

When two people are dating seriously and beginning to suspect that their relationship is special, each partner commonly invests a lot of energy into the relationship. Each person shows his or her caring in a different way. Some may write notes, buy small gifts, or offer small kindnesses. Others may call, provide treats, or just hang out with the other person. While the feverish pace of early love may settle into a steadier pattern of affection over time, the need for continuing investment in a relationship never goes away – even after years of marriage.

In general, *Care* focuses on the value of kindness, understanding, respect, and caring support as a core in the creation and maintenance of stable, healthy marriage and couple relationships

(Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012). *Care* is distinct from the dimension of *Share* in that it emphasizes the behaviors that a person can invest in the relationship independent of the partner's behaviors or readiness to reciprocate. *Care* includes two primary practices: keeping a positive orientation toward a partner and engaging in relationship-building activities. The first practice emphasizes the vital role of thoughts and feelings. The second practice describes behaviors that can strengthen a relationship. Following these recommended practices is not easy and requires intentional effort (see *Choose*). When we work at a practice, we do it imperfectly, but doing more of the practices described in this chapter can make a relationship stronger. Even taking one practice and doing it better can make a difference.



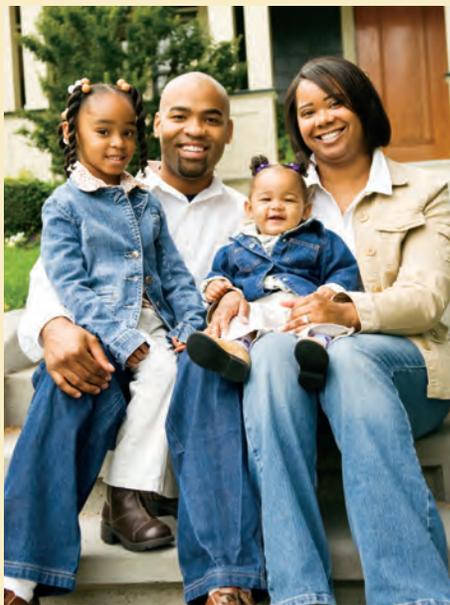
Cultivating Positivity

Cultivating positivity in couple relationships may be one of the most important factors in the well-being of a relationship. Happily married spouses engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of mutually positive perceptions that encourage positive interactions, which in turn foster positive perceptions (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996;



Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Distressed spouses engage in the opposite pattern, emphasizing negative perceptions of each other and aversive interactions. Spouses need to continually work to maintain the positivity in their relationships. The use of positivity, assurances, and cooperation are strongly related to relationship quality for both husbands and wives (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Even during a challenging day, each partner can *Choose to Care* for their spouse by showing compassion and empathy.

When people give more to the relationship than their partner expects, relationship prospects are strengthened.



Why *Care* Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- 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 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 since many of them may have lacked 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.

In fact, in one study, the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction was the extent to which the partner's use of assurances and positivity exceeded expectations for these activities (Dainton, 2000). In many relationships, each person waits for the other to be positive and encouraging. Yet each person can invest in the relationship independent of the partner's contribution. Such contributions may readily draw the partner into investing in the relationship as suggested by Fowers and associates (1996, 2011). Yet even in those cases, when a partner does not respond in kind, the person who invests in the relationship is taking a stand for caring and goodness.

Give Five Positives for Each Negative

Gottman (1994) summarized a key discovery of his extensive research when he observed that "we have found that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula: no matter what style your marriage follows, you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable" (p.29). A wealth of positive feelings – described as positive sentiment override – can help a couple deal with marital challenges (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). While there will always be some irritations and challenges in the best of relationships, each partner can individually choose to notice and appreciate the good in his or her relationship. Positivity has a vital role in sustaining a relationship.

Keeping a Positive Orientation Toward One's Partner

Elements of relationships can be divided into three parts: (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 (Gottman, 2011). Generally, on most days, it is common for individuals to like about 80% of things about his or her partner. This means that there are 80% of things that they do not want to change about their partner. Of the other 20%, commonly, 70% of things one dislikes about their partner will not change, no matter how much the individual nags or complains (Gottman, 1994). The other 30%, generally, will only change when their partner focuses on the good. Focusing on the things that cannot change can give the individual a negative mindset and lead to less marital satisfaction (Gottman, 2011). Focusing on the things that are disliked but can be changed needs to be discussed in a healthy way in order for it to benefit both partners and to strengthen the relationship. Those individuals who focus on the things they like about their partner are more satisfied and may create a positivity cycle (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Gottman, 2011).

Notice and Remember Positive Moments in the Relationship

Positive illusions, or unrealistically optimistic or biased views of another person, have positive effects. People are happier in their relationships when they idealize their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In fact, a certain amount of idealization may be essential to satisfying marital relationships. When happily married people's perceptions of their partners are compared to the self-perceptions of that person and perceptions by close friends, the partner's perceptions are higher. Happily married spouses are said to have benevolent bias, meaning they see more virtue in their partners than others see (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000). There are several practical things that people can do to sustain their positive perceptions. In fact, Gottman (1994) recommends that partners become the architects of their own thoughts. He suggests that couples look through family photo albums or reread old love letters to stir up memories of good times together. People can also develop and memorialize lists of qualities they see in their partners.



Helping Couples Identify Positives

- Point out positive things they are doing.
- Reframe “weaknesses” as areas for growth.
- Help them let some negatives slide without comment or dwelling on past problems.
- Help them recognize that even small, positive steps are still moving them in the right direction.
- Suggest they take pictures of great moments so they can reminisce later and share with others.

Take a Positive View of Human Nature, Attributing Problems to Temporary Causes and Positives to Stable Causes

Almost any behavior can be interpreted in ways that assume good intent or foul intent in the actor. The more that a person holds cynical, suspicious, and negative views of human nature the more likely they are to be vulnerable to the effects of stress (Graham & Conoley, 2006). Positive or benign interpretations of partner behavior are good for a relationship (Fincham & Bradbury, 2004) while cynical hostility may be associated with physiological distress in husbands (Smith & Brown, 1991). There is evidence that humans tend to see other people in extreme categories – as good or evil (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). It is not uncommon for stress in marriage to activate a cascade of negative appraisals (Fincham & Bradbury, 2004). When humans, in general, and romantic partners, in particular, make allowances for the circumstances that cause even good people to act in imperfect ways, they are more likely to sustain a caring relationship.

Show Empathy or Compassion (Rather Than Irritation and Anger) Toward Partner’s Struggles and Limitations

Sprecher & Fehr (2005) defined compassionate love as:

“An attitude toward other(s) . . . containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need (p. 630).

Research has found a strong relationship between a partner's empathic perspective taking and both emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction (e.g., Cramer, 2003; Schutte et al., 2001). The ability to understand a partner's pain and show compassion is a part of healthy relationships. In fact, the lack of compassion in relationships may be the most common reason couples seek the help of family therapists (Stosny, 2004). When partners choose to see each other with empathy and compassion, they are more likely to sustain a caring relationship.

Cultural Considerations

- The consequences of living in poverty may affect one's ability to care for one's partner. Living with limited resources means extensive energy needs are directed at working and providing basic needs for the couple or the family. This creates a heavy weight for individuals and often results in stress, exhaustion, frustration, and less energy available to care for others (Rank, 2000).
- Supportive behaviors are likely to be different among differing ethnic groups. Couples from different cultures will show care for each other in culturally relevant ways. For example, a Navajo couple may nurture each other by using terms of endearment such as "my wife" or "my husband" or by doing a service project for their in-laws (Skogrand et al., 2007). Whereas, a Latino couple, where the family is as important as the couple relationship, may want to plan a very special time and include the entire family (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2009).

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

Engage in Pro-Relationship Behaviors

In addition to the management of thoughts and feelings described in the preceding section, there are behaviors that are vitally important for maintaining and strengthening a relationship. As before, the behaviors described in this section are those that either person can undertake with or without partner participation.

Express Love in Ways That are Meaningful to Your Partner

Central to the dimension of *Care* is nurturing the relationship. Nurturing can be defined as acting in ways that the partner considers to be warm, supportive, and caring (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). Individuals have different ways that they like to be loved or supported. This is because each person may have a different understanding of what communicates love based on their own background and experiences. Popular literature describes languages of love (See Chapman, 1995) that are based on the concept of shared meaning, which is vital in healthy relationships (Gottman, 1994; Phillips, Bishoff, Abbott, & Xia, 2009). It makes sense that our efforts to show love must be tuned to

our partners' preferences if they are to be effective. In couple relationships, it is meaningful for one partner to understand the other's needs or preferences regarding expressions of love (see *Know*) and then personalize or customize their messages of love for that person. Research with couples shows that their awareness of each other's needs and preferences in the relationship is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction and quality (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000).

Recognize and Respond Positively to Bids for Connection

Gottman (1999; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) has described the vital importance of partners turning toward each other. Bids for connection are described as "a gesture, a look, a touch – any single expression that says, 'I want to feel connected to you'" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, p. 4). In response to bids for connection, some people turn away or turn against their partners. Such actions can lead to the spiral of negativity in the relationship (Gottman, 2011). Yet when partners turn toward each other (see *Share*), the relationship is strengthened (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). One of the challenges in responding to bids for connection is that they may often be very subtle and go unnoticed by the partner. A simple observation by one person may be an invitation to a discussion or a testing of the waters for deeper discussion. While no person can guess the thoughts and intentions of his or her partner, each person can be open to the wealth of invitations behind simple words and gestures. When in doubt, a person can ask about the meaning of words or actions.

Proactively and Unconditionally Show Affection and Appreciation

Gottman (1999) observed that reciprocal exchanges of positive behavior are not the basis of healthy relationships. "Not only aren't happy marriages characterized by the quid pro quo, but it actually characterizes unhappy marriages! Unhappy couples are the ones who keep tabs on positives given and received, whereas happy couples are positive unconditionally" (p. 12). This discovery leads directly to the recommendation at the heart of the *Care* dimension – that each person shows affection and appreciation without waiting for the partner to earn it (also see *Choose*).

Make Time for Shared Talk and Activities

Building a strong relationship requires a commitment of time together (see *Choose* and *Share*). The investment of time in shared activities is a significant predictor of marital satisfaction (Russell-Chapin, Chapin, & Sattler, 2001). According to one study, the most important

determinant of women's marital happiness is the emotional engagement of their husbands (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). While much research on American marriages has focused on the division of housework and paid work – who does what inside and outside the home – new research, by contrast, shows wives care most about how affectionate and understanding their husbands are, and how much quality time they spend with their husbands (Lee & Waite, 2010). Strong relationships are built on shared time and talk (see *Share*).

Support Your Partner During Times of Challenge or Frustration

Supportive behaviors, both real and imagined, are associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003). When an individual faces challenges and frustrations, his/her partner has the opportunity to provide support, understanding, compassion, and encouragement. Rather than challenges in either partner's life being seen as a problem, they can be seen as an opportunity to draw close and to support each other.

Responding in Positive Manner to Negative Events

In all relationships, each partner will inevitably do or say something to cause the other person to become upset, irritated, or annoyed. This may be forgetting an important date, making a critical remark, or not spending enough time with the partner. When an individual has engaged in a potentially destructive behavior, partners who accommodate – willingly inhibit impulses to react destructively and instead react constructively – have relationships with greater couple functioning and satisfaction (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Showing Appreciation and Gratitude

Making sure each partner feels valued and appreciated – through both behaviors and words – has a powerful effect on relationships (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012). Spouses who feel a greater sense of gratitude from their partners possess much higher levels of marital satisfaction, and this felt gratitude can even offset impacts on relationship quality caused by poor

Working with Youth

- Adolescents can benefit by seeing the parallels between care in committed relationships and marriages in adulthood and how they care for, and are cared for by, family members and friends. Focus on the concept of care broadly: care for other family members, care for friends, care for dating partners.
- Youth also need to understand that care does not mean giving up who you are to please the other person or meet the other person's needs. Rather, care is a mutual part of a healthy relationship (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). Emphasize a balance of care for others with a *care for self*.
- It is normal for youth to be self-focused; adolescence is a time of identity formation and self-development (Kerpelman et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2001). Acknowledge with youth that it is not selfish to be self-focused at this time in their lives, since this is a time of making important decisions about life goals. Balance this message with the importance of having empathy for others. Help adolescents build empathy for others – engage youth in empathy building activities and projects.
- Offer role models to show adolescents what healthy, caring relationships look like. Be aware that some youth may not live in families where they experience or observe caring relationships.
- Help adolescents develop communication skills through activities and role plays that convey appreciation and caring. Teach adolescents skills for communicating about interpersonal conflict in ways that help to nurture growth and understanding within their relationships.



Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University



communication (Barton, 2013). When couples struggle with daily household chores and similar matters, it is seldom over who does what, but over the giving and receiving of gratitude (see Hochschild, 1990; Nock 2011).

Conclusion

By practicing *Care*, couples can increase the joy in their relationship. When each individual in the relationship focuses on the positives of their partner and the relationship, is supportive, makes time for their partner, shows affection unconditionally, shows love to their partner in a way that the partner enjoys, and makes and responds to bids for connection, a cycle of positivity can begin and continue. These expressions of positivity have been described as being synonymous to making *deposits in the partner's emotional "bank account"* (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When the couple experiences hard times, conflict, and stress in their relationship, investments made into the emotional

Implications for Practice



- Ask clients to share happy memories of time spent with their partners or families. Ask them to describe why the experience was positive and what their partners did to contribute to it.
- 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 partners when they see them next.
- Have clients identify activities that they could engage in with their partners that would 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 would make them feel loved. Have them share their lists with one another so 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.
- Have clients begin to actively express appreciation to their partner. Have them strive to do and say something that expresses gratitude to their partner daily.

bank account can help maintain a positive outlook on the situation (see *Manage*). While many couples begin their relationship with practicing *Care*, it is important that *Care* – and deposits into the emotional bank account – be regularly maintained.



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