

Tip Sheet

Why Good Health Matters in Relationships



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An individual's mental and physical health can impact the family and couple relationships for better or for worse.^{1,2,3} The decisions couples make and the lifestyle they create form a "health capitol of couples."⁴ This capitol can serve as a foundation of relationship flourishing as well as of continuing individual well-being and resilience when inevitable challenges arise. Staying as healthy as possible and managing stress effectively are important parts of strengthening a couple relationship and thus supporting the stability of families. When individuals attend to their own health, the couple unit can also benefit. Importantly, couple-level wellness strategies and mutual support create an atmosphere where health capitol and resilience can reach their full potential.

Health is not only the absence of illness but is multi-dimensional, including wellness in the emotional, social, physical and spiritual domains.^{5,6} Wellness entails balance across domains. It fluctuates and is not absolute, but instead is a continuum. Research has supported that wellness in these areas is linked to positive outcomes for individuals and couples. The emotional domain concerns feelings, and emotional health involves being aware of and able to express and manage one's own feelings and connect to the feelings of others.⁷ The social realm concerns quality relationships with others, inside and outside the family circle, that are facilitated by supportive



actions and communication skills.⁸ This area also includes connection to the larger community. The physical sphere is the condition of the body entwined with lifestyle habits and prevention/maintenance practices.⁹ Finally, the core of the spiritual domain has been defined as a sense of meaning and coherence in life, which often includes connection to some higher purpose or power and the identification of important values and standards to guide everyday life.¹⁰ Building

health capitol in these areas does require some investment of time; however, many people find they can free up some time by cutting back on activities that are less health-promoting such as excess computer or television usage.

Couples can support each other in maintaining health in each of these domains in a number of ways. They

can encourage each other to engage in activities independently (e.g., she likes to garden, he likes to walk and each of them fits these in when they can); do activities at the same time but separately (e.g., one person gardens while the other goes for a walk); or they can engage in healthful activities together (e.g., they garden together then go for a short walk together). While any and all of these options have value, joint companionate activity can have a value-added benefit to the couple relationship. Relationships benefit most when shared free time activities are enjoyed by

both rather than one person resentfully agreeing to do something they detest.¹¹ This can be especially challenging for those with higher than average income-related stress, nonstandard and/or non-overlapping shift work, and limited access to healthcare. To build health capital, couples must see the value of paying attention to these areas and then build a set of strategies that is flexible, realistic, and fitted to their individual needs. Specifically, partners can work together to make the most of their limited joint free time to promote good health in each of these domains.

There are numerous wellness-promoting activities that partners can do—individually and as a couple—in each domain. Specific opportunities will differ across locales, and many couples may benefit from information about the range available to them. Some general ideas follow.

- **Emotional:** When individuals and couples are busy with any combination of work and family life (e.g., children, caring for extended family members, and many other responsibilities that are part of modern roles), emotional wellness is often threatened but is rarely given attention until a crisis emerges. At the most basic level, partners can set aside time for identifying emotions and create a social environment within the relationship that is supportive of expressing them.

Stress management techniques are important for effectively dealing with emotions, especially strong or negative ones. An example is deep breathing as a way of soothing the body's responses to strong emotions that can cascade



out of control. Many communities have free or low-cost opportunities to learn useful methods.

- **Social:** It is tempting to let the quality of social relationships diminish when life is busy. Relationship maintenance strategies do not have to always be time- or energy-intensive or expensive. For example, couples can use everyday opportunities such as planned shared meals that minimize distraction by television and encourage open and supportive conversations.

Some time spent on connecting to the larger community and “giving of self” can be remarkably healthful, for example, joining a neighborhood park cleanup crew once a month or volunteering to read with a child at the local library. It is important to prevent social involvements from becoming overly demanding. When couples share some social connections and commitments, it can strengthen their relationship.

- **Physical:** While exercise is a well-known path to being healthy, it is not regularly practiced by most people.

Familiar challenges tend to discourage regular physical activity such as time, fatigue, and finances. Even modest increases in activity can make a big difference. For example, walking can be increased in small doses, is free, and can be done with a partner, allowing for conversation. In fact, couples who exercise together are more likely to keep doing it. Couples can walk together in their

neighborhood or, if safety is an issue, at the local high school track or at a shopping mall.

Healthy eating patterns are also key to keeping physically fit. They are more likely to be achieved when partners work together to identify one or two small changes and stick to them. For example, couples can eat one more serving of vegetables each day or limit fast food to once per week rather than three times a week.

- **Spiritual:** Spirituality can mean different things to different people. Individuals and couples can explore what spirituality means to them and what helps them release control to escape their daily stress. Some couples enjoy participating in religious activity independently or with a group such as praying or meditating; some believe in a higher power; while others enjoy spending time in nature or are inspired and drawn to exploring the goodness within and around them. Regardless of the selected activity, having some regular time set aside to address spiritual health can reduce stress for individuals and improve couple relationships, whether it is in a formal group setting or at home.



Conclusion

Building multidimensional health capital is important for individuals but can also help couple relationships become and remain strong and resilient. Income, exhaustion, and the pace of modern life make attending to wellness difficult at times and necessitate some planning. Individuals with partners who are unwilling to work with them in improving wellness in each of these domains will still benefit themselves and in their relationships by making an effort in each. There are free and low-cost opportunities in most communities as well as materials that are available online that can be accessed on computers at public libraries. Raising consciousness and providing some seed ideas can start couples off on the path to growing dynamic health capital that promotes wellbeing for individuals and stability for couples and families.

Work Consulted

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Notes

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