

Family Communication

DURING TIMES OF STRESS

In a rapidly changing society, family life is not always predictable. Though families have never been completely free from problems, the battle seems tougher today as outside forces, such as the influence of the media and of social changes, impact the family unit. As a result, many of us are under a lot of stress.

The evidence is clear that when people experience too many *major life events* (the death of a spouse, divorce, the loss of a farm or other serious financial difficulties) the chance of illness increases. According to research studies, life's *daily strains*, such as work overload, deadlines or the demands and expectations of a growing or aging family, can be equally stressful. Most of us can handle some hassles each day, but when daily strains become chronic—with no relief in sight—the pile-up can become as stressful as major life changes, taking on crisis proportions.

Especially during times of stress, it is increasingly important to have open lines of honest communication within a family. Without effective communication, tough times are even tougher. In

any crisis situation, a family goes through a definite pattern of emotional responses as it handles the chaos or grief.

Sharing and talking about problems are necessary for the overall well-being of the family and its individual members. The following stages describe the general process of dealing with stress and stress overload:

1. **Shock**—results in numbness or disbelief, denial.
2. **Recoil**—results in anger, confusion, blaming, guilt and bargaining.
3. **Depression**—results in feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.
4. **Reorganization**—results in acceptance and recovery.

Without an understanding of this process, increased friction or increased isolation between family members may result as people move through these stages at different times. Good communication helps members progress through these stages. Throughout this process, clear and open communication joins members together as they share their reactions and links them to outside sources of support, which can provide acceptance of emotions that need to be

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expressed. If emotional responses are not expressed, an individual or the family may not reach complete acceptance of the situation.

Sometimes family members are afraid to talk about the issues involved in a crisis situation, or they feel that discussion will just make matters worse. Many families have “filters” on their communication channels. They effectively filter out anger, resentment, joy, concern or “unwanted news” from whatever information which is shared by a family member. The filter—either spoken or unspoken—may go something like this, “Such things have no place in a nice family like ours, so let’s not talk about it.” The silence only serves to block the natural process that a family must go through to recover from the crisis.

Coping by Communicating

Once we are aware of the sources of our stress and the possible impact it can have on us, coping becomes easier. The key word is “coping,” not “eliminating,” because as long as we live we will have stress. Some families cope well with stress while others suffer almost constant difficulty. What is the difference? The difference seems to reside in the recognition and communication of at least three factors:

- the way an individual or family perceives or interprets the stressor.
- availability and use of supports within the community.
- availability and use of personal and family resources.

Perception of the stressor. A carpenter who is laid off every fall and rehired each spring has a different perception of his “pink slip” than does someone who has spent 20 years of his or her working life in one business that is now closing. Two people can perceive the same stressor very differently depending on their experiences, personalities, health and financial situa-

tions. This also is true within a family undergoing a crisis like bankruptcy or unemployment. Each individual’s sharing of his perception of the situation can be very helpful in dealing with the problem and in meeting the emotional needs of family members.

Supports within the community. Helping professionals, such as doctors, ministers, lawyers or counselors, can make stressful major life events easier to handle. Churches, clubs and civic groups or various types of support groups also prove invaluable to some families. Open discussions within the family often can determine the type of support needed.

Personal and family resources. Time, money, skills, possessions (such as a reliable car), personal qualities (such as patience) and support networks (family members, friends, relatives and neighbors) can affect how well families cope with stress. Money can be both a source of stress and a resource for coping (How will we spend it or how much goes into savings?). Possessions, such as a house, car and tools, can help in coping with stress or can add to it, depending on how well they fit our other resources. Personal qualities include both temperament and the way you perceive previous experiences. Personal responses can make the difference in how successfully you handle stressful events. Some people argue, rebel or withdraw (sleep, overeat, drink, leave). Still others attempt to problem-solve by changing the situation or changing their perception of the situation. Try to take some time in the next few days to discuss with your family the ways you and other family members currently cope, and look for way you might strengthen your ability to cope.

Effective communication takes skill and practice. Virginia Satir, a prominent family therapist, described the communication process as “a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings.” More than just the exchange of words between people, communication includes what is said, how it is said and when it is said. It also includes our

nonverbal actions and our emotional responses.

In simplest terms, communication normally involves talking and listening, the sending and receiving of messages. We should try to express ourselves with as much clarity, honesty and sincerity as possible to avoid some common pitfalls of effective communication, which include:

Judging—projecting our own interpretation or judgment into someone else’s message.

Criticizing—belittling another person’s feelings or opinions.

Blaming—“We wouldn’t be in this mess if you had done what you were supposed to do!”

Name-calling—used as an attempt to win an argument rather than resolve the issue.

Labeling—“The main problem around here is that you’re just plain lazy.”

Moralizing—telling others what they “should,” “should not” or “ought” and “ought not” to do.

Advising—“If I were you, this is what I would do . . .”

These techniques focus on the person rather than the message. Using them may put the other person on guard causing an invisible wall of defense to go up that blocks out whatever else we might want to say.

In addition to speaking our message clearly, we must learn to listen. Listening involves more than just hearing words. To become good listeners, several things are required:

1. Putting aside your own thoughts and opinions while the other person is talking to you.
2. An openness and respect for what the other person is sharing.
3. Sensitivity, which means listening for feelings and meaning.

A big problem with the spoken language is that we listen faster than people talk. Most people talk at about

125 words per minute, but we are able to listen at a rate of about 400 words per minute. This means that we think ahead of the person who is speaking to us, which explains why we must work at being good listeners.

Whether talking one-on-one or engaging in a group discussion, here are a few suggested guidelines for improving family communications:

- Let family members know that you care and have time to listen.
- Set aside a part of each day for family “talk time.”
- Give each family member a chance to talk privately ... one to one.
- Observe a cooling-off period when talking becomes difficult.

Summary

Open, honest, positive and consistent communication has been shown to be one of the most crucial elements in establishing and maintaining strong family relationships. During times of crisis, conflict or stress overload, good family communication takes on added importance, because the emotional imbalance caused by these events makes interpersonal relationships even more difficult. A practical application of the principles contained within this publication can contribute positively toward better communication, resulting in more effective management of stress and more satisfying family relationships.

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*This publication was issued in print by the North Carolina
Cooperative Extension Service as HE-424 (May 1994)*

Published by
North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service