



## Strengthen couple relationships during difficult times

Difficult times often stem from larger issues that are out of our control, such as the ongoing issues with the economy or the recent drought. These types of events cause not only financial hardship, but also relationship tension. Feelings of hopelessness, worry, anxiety and stress increase during difficult times. These feelings and reactions may hurt a couple's relationship, or may bring them closer as they work through it together.

Healthy relationships can be the most valuable resource for couples to cope with difficult times. Here are a few tips for strengthening couple relationships:

**Be supportive to one another.** High stress or long term stress is easy to overlook and, as a result, your loving relationship can slip away before you know it. Learning to manage stress positively is an important step to maintain healthy relationships. Recognize stress symptoms and sources and help each other to reduce some of the stressful effects. For instance, getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, exercising and taking time to relax are critical during times of stress. When couples make an extra effort to manage stress, show affection, and encourage and take care of each other, they feel secure and better attend to growing closer through tough times.

**Have a positive attitude.** In times of stress, conflict and negative thoughts and interactions can easily arise. John Gottman, a psychologist and researcher at the University of Washington found that healthy and happy relationships involve five positive interactions for every one negative interaction. Really happy relationships have an even greater number of positive interactions as compared to negative interactions. Too much negativity makes relationships unstable. Positive interactions may include being affectionate, truly listening to each other, sharing joy and interests, validating feelings, etc. It is not always easy to be positive when dealing with difficulties; however, research has found that keeping a positive attitude is one of the most important skills for making a relationship strong.

**Keep open communication.** Positive, open, honest and consistent communication is the key to a healthy relationship, but this can be especially challenging during times of conflict, burden or crisis. Couples need to take time to listen to each other's point of view without judgment. Keep the lines of communication open and take turns to allow each other to express thoughts, feelings and ideas. Be a good listener and give your spouse full attention. Respect different perspectives, even when you disagree. Pay attention to nonverbal messages and feelings as well as spoken words.

**Make couple time an important priority.** Spouses may lose touch with each other during tough times. By continuing to cultivate love, respect and kindness for each other on a daily basis, couple relationships can be strong and happy. Setting aside time with your spouse on a consistent basis or having weekly dates to talk and reconnect helps nurture relationships. Making time for each other and spending quality time together are like putting deposits in your relationship bank account which can make relationships healthier, happier and longer lasting.

Marriage requires a couple to work together as a team to establish and maintain a healthy relationship. Avoid judging, criticizing or blaming each other. A team needs to be flexible, supportive, encouraging and respectful of each other's point of view to work through solutions during tough times.