

be resilient

A publication of the Employee Assistance Centre

Love under Lockdown

The pandemic and resulting restrictions have meant many couples are spending more time together and are under more stress than ever before. Stress and its effects on the individual have become such widely discussed topics that most are familiar with the array of physical and psychological problems stress causes.

In couple relationships, stress is no less damaging; it's been associated with relationship aggression, communication problems, relationship dissatisfaction and breakup, so managing couple stress is important for both the health of the individuals and that of the relationship.

In a healthy relationship, everyone takes responsibility for and manages their own emotional responses to stress. A strong negative response is never your partner's "fault;" someone else can't "make" you behave in a hurtful way. When something is said or done to upset you, you're the only one who can choose how to respond.

When it comes to managing stress and its effects on a relationship, there are two parts to a successful approach – individual strategies and couple strategies. In both cases, we aim to

increase coping and decrease stress.

Coping is increased when we dedicate time and energy to self-care and self-regulation. Each person in a relationship is responsible for their own self-care and for supporting their partner's efforts at self-care. Self-care looks different for everyone, but as a rule, self-care activities should be relaxing, connect you to a source of joy or pleasure, or attend to your basic needs.

Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and manage your feelings, thoughts and actions. Self-regulation skills are an important aspect of coping and are correlated to one's ability to stay calm during conflict and to return to calm when upset.

In relationships where one or both people can't self-regulate, conflict is more likely to be damaging or too frequent. These relationships are also vulnerable to relationship aggression. When stuck at home with a partner, vulnerable relationships are even more at risk as a result of having lost the built-in breaks that work and social lives provide.

Self-regulation starts with noticing the signs that you're becoming upset and

Did you know?

Relationship aggression is an umbrella term for any negative and harmful physical, verbal, mental or emotional behaviours in a relationship. These behaviours exist on a continuum of severity from name-calling, to gaslighting (the psychological manipulation of another person to make them question their sanity), bullying, to physical abuse.

Relationship aggression is harmful to the individual and makes relationships more vulnerable to breakup, so it's an important factor to prevent or change to keep individuals and relationships intact and healthy.

then responding in a way that calms. Simply noticing is a powerful tool because what we notice, we can change. Ideally, we want to be able to catch cues early so that we can quickly and easily adjust. Like a train leaving the station, it's much easier to slow the train down when it hasn't yet gotten too far down the tracks. Once the train is roaring ahead at full speed, hitting the brakes is still effective but it takes a lot longer to come to a stop.

Most people find physical cues the easiest cues to notice. What does your body do when you're upset? Increased heart rate, sweating, clenched hands, and tense muscles are common experiences. Your partner probably has some observations as someone who sees your experience from the outside,

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so you may want to ask what they notice. Other common cues include racing or negative thoughts, a raised voice, or feelings of being overwhelmed or worried. It's important to have a good idea of what cues indicate you're becoming upset so that you can notice them when they're happening.

When you know the cues that indicate you're upset or becoming upset, there are a few things you can do. Managing feelings, thoughts and actions is largely done by managing some of your automatic body processes, as these processes are responsible for setting your emotional response in motion when you're faced with something upsetting:

- **Take a break.** If you're in the middle of a conflict with your partner, agree to take a minimum 20-minute break so that each of you can calm down. It's important to respect the break time, even if you feel like you're not the one who needs it. When you come back together, be sure both of you are feeling ready to resume the discussion calmly before you get started again.
- **Move your body.** Taking a short walk, sweeping the garage, or doing a physical activity you enjoy will expel some of the excess energy that can build up when you're stressed or upset and helps to bring you back to calm.
- **Catch negative thoughts.** Our thoughts fuel our emotions, so noticing and challenging negative thoughts is an effective way to stay grounded. Watch out for thoughts that include the words "always" and "never." Black-and-white thinking often emerges when we're upset, and it isn't helpful. Instead, tell yourself that how you're feeling is important, but that thought is unhelpful. A technique like "changing the channel" is more useful than getting stuck in negative thinking. Remember a positive memory or

a place you love to be, imagine yourself handling the current situation in a healthy way or imagine saying something kind to yourself or your partner.

- **Warm physical contact.** Physical affection like handholding and hugging for as little as 20 seconds has been shown to regulate people's stress response. For best results, make it a ritual every day.
- **Breathe.** Most of your body's automatic responses are outside your control, but breathing is something that you can do with intention even though it's an automatic function. When you use mindful breathing, you send signals to the brain that say things are okay and you can calm down. Practiced regularly, this strategy trains your brain to get settled more quickly over time. In other words, the more you use mindful breathing, the better it works.

When we become overwhelmed by emotion, a state often called "flooded," we don't listen or communicate effectively. When two people who are emotionally connected in the way that couples are become flooded, they create a self-reinforcing feedback loop: the more upset I become, the more upset you become, and then I become more upset, which further increases how upset you are, etc. You may have experienced this sort of escalation that feels a bit like a runaway train, especially if you've been at home in isolation with your partner and have found yourselves pushing one another's buttons. The best antidote is to take a break, separately use the tools described above, and revisit the topic when you're both feeling grounded again. Practiced consistently, this will help you reduce damaging conflict and cope better with the stress your quarantined relationship is under.

– **Jodie Voth, RMFT, Clinical Services Coordinator**

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.

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Consult a professional (counsellor, physician, etc.) before taking action with respect to any topics discussed.

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