



Member Pulse

Digest

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Communicating Effectively with Your Spouse

- While romance might get a relationship started, good communication keeps it going. These healthy communication habits can help you strengthen your bonds with your spouse:
- **Make intimacy a priority**
- With busy schedules and multiple demands, it's easy to let your need for intimate contact with your spouse slide; but intimacy strengthens a relationship like nothing else can. No matter how busy you are with work and family obligations, try to spend private time regularly with your spouse. Even if you don't have time for romance, use the time to talk about the successes and frustrations of your day.
- **Find a good time to talk about difficult subjects**
- When you have something difficult to talk about, check with your mate for a specific time to discuss it. Resist the temptation to talk when he or she walks in the door after a hard day at work. Try choosing a subject you want to discuss, and both of you write about it for 10 minutes; then talk about it for 10 minutes. Make sure you stick to the time frame. If you need more time, agree on when you can talk about it again.
- **Focus your concerns**
- Think about what you want to say before you begin to talk. With sensitive topics, it might be tempting to avoid talking about what's on your mind. Get right to the point and after you've stated your request, listen closely to your spouse's reply. Stay focused on finding solutions to problems rather than on emphasizing differences.
- **Let both sides be heard**
- When you have a disagreement, remember that both of your needs are important. Use a firm and gentle tone of voice in stating what you need, why you need it and what you want your mate to do. However, try not to elevate your needs above your spouse's. Listen and show that you see things from your spouse's perspective.
- Conflict is a normal part of healthy relationships. But remember, your safety always comes first. If you suspect that you are the victim of abuse (physical or emotional), either currently or in the past, seek help. If you are uncertain, a therapist may assist you in helping to identify any possible issues. If you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.
- **Be honest but not accusatory**
- It's easy to blame the other person when you're angry or hurt, but blaming only invites retaliation. Talk about your feelings instead. For instance, avoid saying "You ruined the plans again. You're always late." Instead, using "I" statements, say: "I'm very disappointed that you were late. I was

counting on you to be home in time.” This approach is less likely to provoke a defensive response and more likely to encourage an open discussion.

- **Value your differences**
- Sometimes the differences in your temperaments and communication styles will be more evident than your similarities. When you feel this way, how and what you communicate to your spouse will determine how effectively you solve your problems. Appreciate your differences and you’ll learn to work together better.
- **Work towards shared goals**
- On a regular basis, try to work with your spouse to identify shared goals (such as saving up for a house or starting a business) and develop a plan to get there. A shared purpose can bring you and your spouse closer and provide a great sense of accomplishment when you achieve your goals together.



Anger management: Your questions answered

Anger itself isn't a problem — it's how you handle it. Consider the nature of anger, as well as how to manage anger and what to do when you're confronted by someone whose anger is out of control.

What is anger?

Anger is a natural response to perceived threats. It's a warning bell that tells you when something is wrong. Anger causes your body to release adrenaline — the fight-or-flight hormone — which can increase muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure. Anger might trigger or encompass other emotions, such as sadness, disappointment or frustration. Anger becomes a problem only when you don't manage it in a healthy way.

So it's not 'bad' to feel angry?

Being angry isn't always a bad or negative thing. Being angry can motivate people to listen to your concerns. It can prevent others from walking all over you. It can motivate you to get involved with causes that you care about. The key is managing your anger in a healthy way.

What causes people to get angry?

You might have many things to feel threatened about — from financial crises and peer pressure to drug addiction and war — and some people respond in a negative way. Still, most people don't walk around feeling mad all the time. When someone explodes with anger, there's usually a triggering event — such as a disagreement at work or being stuck in traffic — that brings a mix of simmering emotions to the boiling point.

Your personal history feeds your reactions to anger as well. That's why some people react so angrily to certain situations, such as losing a parking space, while others take it in stride. For example, if you were taught that being angry is a negative thing, you might not know how to express anger appropriately — so your frustrations simmer and make you miserable, or build up until you explode in an angry outburst. In other cases, changes in brain chemistry or underlying medical conditions can trigger angry outbursts.

What's the best way to handle anger?

When you're angry, you can choose to express or suppress the emotion. Here's the difference:

- **Expression.** This is the act of conveying your anger. Expression ranges from a reasonable, rational discussion to a violent outburst.

- **Suppression.** This is an attempt to hold in or ignore your anger. It also includes passive-aggressive responses — in which you don't express your anger constructively but instead scheme to retaliate.

Ideally, you'll choose constructive expression — stating your concerns and needs clearly and directly, without hurting others or trying to control them.

Can anger harm your health?

Some research suggests that inappropriately expressing anger — such as keeping anger pent up, seething with rage or having violent outbursts — can be harmful to your health. Such responses might aggravate chronic pain or lead to sleep difficulties or digestive problems. There's even some evidence that stress and hostility related to anger can lead to heart disease and heart attack.

When is professional help needed?

Learning to control anger is a challenge for everyone at times. Consider seeking help for anger issues if your anger seems out of control, causes you to do things you regret, hurts those around you or is taking a toll on your personal relationships. You might explore local anger management classes or anger management counseling. With professional help, you can:

- Learn what anger is
- Identify what triggers your anger
- Recognize signs that you're becoming angry
- Learn to respond to frustration and anger in a controlled, healthy way
- Explore underlying feelings, such as sadness or depression

Anger management classes and counseling can be done individually, with your partner or other family members, or in a group. Request a referral from your doctor to a counselor specializing in anger management, or ask family and friends for recommendations. Your health insurer, employee assistance program (EAP), clergy, or state or local agencies also may offer recommendations.

What can you do if you're confronted by someone whose anger is out of control?

Usually, the most rational thing to do is to walk away. If you stay, the situation may escalate into violence. If leaving the situation is difficult or impossible, take reasonable precautions to protect yourself. Don't engage the other person in a manner that's likely to increase the angry behavior.



Stepfamilies: How to help your child adjust

Relationships in stepfamilies can be complicated. When a new stepfamily forms, each family member faces a unique set of challenges and potential sources of stress. Still, it's possible to build a successful blended family.

Consider the challenges a blended family might pose for your child — and what you can do to overcome these hurdles as you build a new life together.

Acknowledge and mourn losses

Your child might be dealing with anguish over a divorce or the death of a parent — or perhaps your child still harbors hope that you and your ex-spouse will reunite. Similarly, your child might also worry that the new marriage and family situation won't last.

Listen to your child's fears and concerns, and allow your child to heal at his or her own pace. Don't expect your child's feelings to resolve quickly or at any specific moment — such as at your wedding or on moving day.

Nurture existing family relationships

Spend time nurturing family relationships that existed before the creation of your stepfamily. For example, plan special activities or outings that involve only you and your child.

Remember, too, that a child entering a newly blended family might feel torn between the parent with whom he or she lives and the other parent. Respect your child's feelings, and be careful not to make negative comments about the other parent — regardless of your feelings for him or her.

Foster new family relationships

It can be difficult for a child to learn how to navigate relationships with a new stepparent or stepsiblings.

To help your child form these bonds, you might identify shared interests among members of your blended family. Encourage your child to spend time getting to know his or her new family members. Be careful to let the new relationships develop at their own pace, however.

If your child criticizes his or her stepparent, try not to overreact. Take comfort in the fact that if the stepparent is sincere in his or her effort to build a relationship, positive feelings will likely outweigh negative ones eventually.

Encourage respect

It can take a couple of years — or even longer — for a new stepfamily to adjust to living together.

Don't pressure your child or other family members to make new relationships work right away. Instead, encourage all family members to treat each other with decency and respect.

Make decisions as a team

Think of your blended family as a unit. Consider holding regular family meetings to discuss problems and come up with positive solutions as a team.

Know when to seek additional help

Most stepfamilies are able to build relationships and work out their problems over time. Others need extra help.

According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, your child might benefit from talking to a mental health provider if he or she feels:

- Alone in dealing with his or her losses
- Torn between two parents or households
- Excluded
- Isolated by feelings of anger and guilt
- Unsure about what's right
- Uncomfortable with any member of his or her original family or stepfamily

In addition, family therapy might be helpful if:

- Your child shows anger or resentment toward a particular family member
- One child seems to be favored over another
- Discipline is left only to the child's parent, rather than involving both the parent and stepparent
- Your child frequently cries or begins to withdraw
- Family members derive no pleasure from typical enjoyable activities, such as being with friends

Remember, making a successful stepfamily takes time. Encourage your family to get to know each other and develop new traditions together. Over time your blended family can build bonds that'll last a lifetime.



Friendships: Enrich your life and improve your health

Friendships can have a major impact on your health and well-being, but it's not always easy to build or maintain friendships. Understand the importance of friendships in your life and what you can do to develop and nurture friendships.

What are the benefits of friendships?

Good friends are good for your health. Friends can help you celebrate good times and provide support during bad times. Friends prevent loneliness and give you a chance to offer needed companionship, too. Friends can also:

- Increase your sense of belonging and purpose
- Boost your happiness
- Reduce stress
- Improve your self-worth
- Help you cope with traumas, such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the death of a loved one
- Encourage you to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking or lack of exercise

Why is it sometimes hard to make friends or maintain friendships?

Many adults find it hard to develop new friendships or keep up existing friendships. Friendships may take a back seat to other priorities, such as work or caring for children or aging parents. You and your friends may have grown apart due to changes in your lives or interests. Or maybe you've moved to a new community and haven't yet found a way to meet people. Developing and maintaining good friendships takes effort. The enjoyment and comfort friendship can provide, however, makes the investment worthwhile.

What's a healthy number of friends?

There's no need to aim for a specific number of friends. Some people benefit from a large and diverse network of friends, while others prefer a smaller circle of friends and acquaintances. There are also different types of friendship. You may have a few close friends you turn to for deeply personal conversations, and more casual friends with whom you see movies, play basketball or share backyard cookouts. Consider what works for you. Overall, the quality of your relationships is more important than the specific number of friends you have.

What are some ways to meet new people?

You can take steps to meet people and develop friendships. For example:

- **Take your child — or pet — for a walk.** Chat with neighbors who are also out and about or head to a popular park and strike up conversations there.
- **Work out.** Take a class at a local gym, senior center or community fitness facility. Start a lunchtime walking group at work.
- **Do lunch.** Invite an acquaintance to join you for coffee or a meal.
- **Accept invites.** When you're invited to a social gathering, say yes. Contact someone who recently invited you to an activity and return the favor.
- **Volunteer.** Offer your time or talents at a hospital, place of worship, museum, community center, charitable group or other organization. You can form strong connections when you work with people who have mutual interests.
- **Attend community events.** Get together with a group of people working toward a goal you believe in, such as an election or the cleanup of a natural area. Find a group with similar interests in an activity, such as auto racing, gardening, reading or making crafts.
- **Go to school.** Take a college or community education course to meet people who have similar interests.
- **Join a faith community.** Take advantage of special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.

Above all, stay positive. You may not become friends with everyone you meet, but maintaining a friendly attitude and demeanor can help you improve the relationships in your life and sow the seeds of friendship with new acquaintances.

How does social media affect friendships?

Joining a chat group or online community might help you make or maintain connections and relieve loneliness. However, research suggests that use of social networking sites doesn't necessarily translate to a larger offline network or closer offline relationships with network members. In addition, remember to exercise caution when sharing personal information or arranging an activity with someone you've only met online.

How can I nurture my friendships?

Developing and maintaining healthy friendships involves give-and-take. Sometimes you're the one giving support, and other times you're on the receiving end. Letting friends know you care about them and appreciate them can help strengthen your bond. It's as important for you to be a good friend as it is to surround yourself with good friends.

To nurture your friendships:

- **Go easy.** Don't overwhelm friends with phone calls, texts, instant messages or emails. Respect your friends' boundaries.
- **Don't compete.** Don't let friendships turn into a battle over who makes the most money or who has the nicest home.
- **Adopt a healthy, realistic self-image.** Work on building your self-esteem by taking care of yourself — eat a healthy diet and include physical activity in your daily routine. Vanity and constant self-criticism can be turnoffs to potential friends.
- **Avoid relentless complaining.** Nonstop complaining can put a strain on your friendships. Talk to your friends about how you can change the parts of your life that make you unhappy.

- **Adopt a positive outlook.** Try to find the humor in things. Laughter is infectious and appealing.
- **Listen up.** Ask what's going on in your friends' lives. Avoid talking about your own problems all the time. Try to only give advice when your friends ask for it.
- **Don't judge.** Give your friends space to change, grow and make mistakes. Encourage your friends to freely express their emotions.
- **Respect privacy.** Keep confidential any personal information that your friends share with you. Try not to ask questions that make your friends uncomfortable.

Remember, it's never too late to build new friendships or reconnect with old friends. Investing time in making friends and strengthening your friendships can pay off in better health and a brighter outlook for years to come.

Getting Started is Easy!
Call your EAP for more information