

**How Healthy Couples**

**Handle Tough Times**

Tough times are a reality for every couple. Couples may face major life transitions, such as a new baby, new job or retirement. They may face ongoing stressors, such as a spouse’s ill health or a negative work environment. They may face losses, such as the death of a friend or family member, or a financial crisis. While tough times affect us all, they can pile on additional stress to your romantic relationship.

Healthy couples get through these tough times — and tough times can even help a couple get closer. Here’s how.

**Healthy couples acknowledge the situation.**

They recognize that they’re in a crisis or challenging situation. They don’t deny, disregard or minimize what’s happening.

**Healthy couples turn toward each other.**

One of the main hallmarks of a healthy couple is that they turn to each other for support and guidance. There’s a sense that they’re in this together. They also empathize with each other.

**Healthy couples actively listen to each other.**

They listen to each other more carefully, and show more curiosity about each other’s perspective, experience and needs.

**Healthy couples admit when they’re wrong.**

Health couples apologize when they behave badly. This is in stark contrast to unhealthy couples who rationalize or deny their hurtful or disrespectful behaviors.

**Healthy couples cope effectively.**

Healthy couples take breaks from the difficult situation. They make time to have fun together. They pursue healthy distractions, such as taking walks and watching funny movies. They also have a broader perspective and adopt an attitude of “this, too, shall pass.” They can see [the situation] as a small piece in the puzzle of their lives and long-term relationship. Unhealthy couples either drown in the problems, leaving no time to bond and refuel, or they collude to avoid the issues, they distance or they self-medicate through drinking, gambling, affairs, etc.

**Healthy couples support each other’s coping styles.**

Partners recognize that they may cope differently, and they respect these differences. For instance, women may need to talk about what they’re going through with a girlfriend while men may need to engage in activities like throwing darts with a friend.

**Healthy couples seek healthy tools.**

While unhealthy couples repeat the same unsuccessful strategies and refuse to ask for help, healthy couples seek outside support and find solutions that work.

**Healthy couples appreciate each other.**

They thank each other for the parts they played in navigating the tough situation. Unhealthy couples, however, take each other for granted and don’t acknowledge the other’s contribution.

**Healthy couples don’t blame each other, even when blame is warranted.**

Blame is a big problem for unhealthy couples and it can turn spouses into enemies. Healthy couples don’t point fingers, even when one partner is responsible for the tough time, such as making a bad financial investment. Instead, healthy couples forgive each other. This doesn’t mean you’ve condoned the bad behavior. It just means you’re willing to let go of your emotional attachment. You’re freeing yourself of suffering. Healthy couples understand that people make mistakes. They focus on solutions and being compassionate.

**Tips for Handling Tough Times**

These are five suggestions for navigating tough times effectively.

**Be curious.**

Instead of getting stuck on one fix, be open to other strategies, including your partner’s suggestions.

**Shift your mindset.**

Instead of thinking “Poor us,” explore how you can grow from this experience as a couple. How can you get closer? How can this become a learning opportunity?

**View the situation like climbing a huge mountain.**

This includes five steps.

* **Get a detailed, aerial view.** Set time aside to discuss the situation, how it’s affecting both of you and your concerns. Listen to each other.
* **Create a mutual map.** Consider each of your concerns, and reach an agreement. What would you like to accomplish? How would you like to get there?
* **Clarify the teamwork.** Create a specific plan that lays out what each partner will do, based on your respective strengths, energy and available time.
* **Use a compass.** Figure out how you’ll know if you’re making progress or getting lost.
* **Bring supplies.** Engage in activities that nourish and energize you individually and as a couple. Know when to rest. Remember, because you’re climbing it together, you can be stronger, and this enormous mountain is less likely to defeat you.

**Touch each other.**

It’s amazing how much touching helps to calm people in times of crisis. Hug each other and touch hands. The literal physical support can be so important.

**Exchange gratitude with each other.**

Share one thing you’re grateful for about your partner or the situation. For instance, if your partner had surgery, you might say, “I’m grateful for the nurses” or “I’m grateful that you’re doing better.” Your partner might say, “I’m grateful that you’re here.” Such exchanges can be the signs of light in the midst of darkness.

All couples go through stressful events, crises and life-changing transitions. However, healthy couples get through them and get closer. We don’t always have choices about the cards we are dealt. But we do have choices about how we play those cards.