

Exercise: Establish a Ritual for Stress-Reducing Conversation

Research shows that one of the best things a couple can do for their marriage is to establish a ritual of regular conversation for coping with everyday stress and occasional sadness. This is the time—ideally each day—when you catch up, focus on each other, swap stories, and show support.

Such conversations can help you to manage pressure, anxiety, and sadness due to problems at your job or in difficult relationships with relatives and friends. These talks can be especially helpful if one or both of you struggle with depression as Kevin did. And even if your mood is generally upbeat, meaningful conversations can help you to handle life's challenges while staying emotionally connected. Think of it as being like a regular trip to the bank; your goal here is to make deposits in your “emotional bank account.”

Use the following instructions and questions to design a conversation ritual for you and your partner. Try it a few times and then evaluate how it's going. Make adjustments as needed to design a ritual that works for you.

1. Designate fifteen to thirty minutes each day to talk about your day.

You may already do this to some extent. But we suggest that you make it intentional. You may want to attach the conversation to some other activity that you do day in and day out—something like eating breakfast together, commuting, taking a walk, or sharing coffee after dinner. The idea is to commit to making the conversation a *significant part* of that experience.

What is the best time of day for you to have a stress-reducing conversation with your partner? _____

Where is the best place to have it? _____

2. Do it the same way every time.

Examples: Sit at the same table, light a candle, use the same two matching coffee mugs. The idea is to make it feel like “a ritual,” something you do together every day to feel connected to each other.

What elements will you use in your conversation ritual? _____

3. Eliminate distractions.

Turn off the television. Let the phone ring. If you have small children, arrange for them to be involved in some other activity (sleeping is nice) so Mom and Dad can talk.

How will you make sure you've got each other's full attention? _____

4. Take turns talking and listening.

Discuss the most important things that have happened to you since the last time you talked. What transpired at work? What did the doctor say? How was your class? Did you talk to your mom? Make sure that each partner gets equal time to talk about his or her day. At first, you can use a clock to time it. Later on, sharing the floor will come naturally.

What are likely topics for each of you in these conversations? _____

5. Show support for your partner as you listen.

- Demonstrate genuine interest by asking questions: “How did it go?” “What was the most important part?” “How do you feel about that?” “What did that mean to you?” “Tell me everything that happened.”
- Communicate understanding: “I can understand why you feel that way.” “I’d be stressed out, too.” “So it sounds like you’re worried.”

- Listen for emotion and respond in kind: "That's really sad." "I can see why you're angry." "Wow, that's exciting!" "I'd be tense in that situation, too."
- Celebrate your partner's success: "That's wonderful!" "I'm so proud of you!" "I'll bet you're so relieved."
- Take your partner's side in conflicts: "That guy is a total jerk." "How could she treat you like that?" (Remember, this is not the time for the listener to complain or criticize the speaker. And don't side with the enemy!)
- Show solidarity: "This is our problem and we will face it together." "I can understand because something similar happened to me."
- Be affectionate: "Come here and let me hold you." "I'm totally on your side."
- Offer help with problem solving: "Let's figure this out." But remember, understanding must come before advice. Don't rush to problem solve. Listening is the most important part.

6. Evaluate your experience.

After practicing a few days, analyze how the conversation is working. Ask these questions:

- Is the time and place working out for you?
- If not, do you need to make adjustments to your schedule so you can make it work?
- Are you able to avoid distractions?
- Are there any elements you'd like to add to make it more satisfying?
- Do you feel that your partner is sharing his or her experiences?
- Do you feel that your partner is listening to you?

What changes, if any, would you like to make in your ritual? _____
