

Understanding Your Partner

Objective

To make it easier to see how each partner's problems can affect your relationship.

You Should Know

It is sometimes difficult to empathize with a partner who has made you angry or disappointed you. But understanding how another person feels does not negate your feelings. Understanding your partner makes it easier for both of you to see how each person's problems can lead to choices or behaviors that affect your relationship.

These suggestions can help you better understand your partner and what they might be experiencing—and to care for yourself:

Show support and empathy. Your partner might worry you will not love or desire them if they are experiencing problems. Your partner might even fear you no longer want to be married to them. It is important to let your partner know you are here for and love them. This reassurance will go a long way toward strengthening your relationship. Alternatively, your negative reactions can potentially exacerbate problems and lead to feelings of hopelessness.

Educate yourself. If your partner has problems that you are confused about, learn more. The best plan of action is to seek out psychological or medical professionals (if required), literature, or online information. Your partner's problems might be off-putting and confusing. You might assume your partner is uncaring, distant, lazy, distracted, irritable, or irrational. Some of these "character flaws" might actually be the consequence of issues your partner is experiencing.

Do not become an enabler or a therapist. You might need to seek outside assistance from a therapist, mediator, religious leader, or other professional to help with your own coping and communication with your partner. You and your partner will gain perspective and guidance, and establish appropriate expectations and healthy boundaries. Your role is to offer love, support, and compassion to your partner. Your partner is responsible for taking the steps to solve their problems so they can be healthy and productive as partners and in other areas of life.

Practice self-care. Self-care is not selfish—it is a necessity. If you fail to focus on your own health, you are at risk of developing physical and emotional problems. Get enough sleep, do some regular physical activity, eat well, spend time with friends or loved ones, and engage in activities or hobbies you enjoy.

Reflect on how you are responding to your partner's problems. Are you stepping up in a way you are proud of—or are you avoiding doing your part to help your partner, your family, and yourself? Successful couples do not allow problems to destroy their relationship but instead view these issues as challenges to manage and overcome. Each partner must be responsible for themselves and have a healthy response and reaction to stress, challenges, and unexpected or problematic situations.

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Describe the problems your partner has:

How do those problems affect you?

How are you managing these problems?

Is your partner effectively managing these problems? Explain.

Describe how these problems have impacted your relationship.

Referring to the earlier suggestions, what can you do to better understand what your partner might be experiencing? What can you do to manage your emotions and reactions? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

What did you learn from this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?
