

Using the 3-Phase Technique to Cope with Stress as a Couple

Objective

To identify ways to manage stress as a couple to improve your relationship.

What to Know

In your relationship, you have probably experienced stress in one form or another. Some stress is directly related to the relationship – things that one partner does or does not do that the other person finds upsetting. There are also external stressors that arise outside the relationship. How each of you manages external stressors might become internal stress if it negatively impacts the relationship.

Stressors can be acute (sudden and sometimes unexpected) or chronic (persist over time). Stressors can also be major (they have a dramatic impact and far-reaching consequences), or they can be minor (daily hassles). How you both cope with stress can be positive or negative. Positive coping strategies are supportive, like offering practical help, joint problem solving, offering encouragement, or expressing solidarity. Negative coping strategies include distancing, responding sarcastically, or showing disinterest.

When an acute, major stressor happens it can either bring you and your partner closer together or pull you apart. For many couples, it is the minor, chronic stressors that erode the relationship over time by reducing positive, caring behaviors, and increasing anger, resentment, or withdrawal.

To better cope with stress, couples can use the “3-phase technique.” This worksheet will help you and your partner practice the “confiding” and “supportive” roles. Follow these steps.

1. Explore. The confiding partner identifies a minor stressor that happened outside the relationship. The confiding partner spends 15-30 minutes:

- describing what happened.
- focusing on the thoughts and emotions they felt at the time of the event and after.
- understanding why the situation was stressful.

The supportive partner:

- actively listens, pays attention, and uses open body language.
- summarizes important points to show they understand.
- asks open-ended questions to get more information.

2. Support. This step lasts about 10 minutes. The supportive partner offers direct support by offering:

- emotional support in the form of empathy (e.g., “That’s terrible! No wonder you feel this way”), understanding (e.g., “I can see why that was so difficult for you”), and reframing (e.g., “I wonder if there is another way to look at this situation”).
- practical support, if appropriate (e.g., “Is there anything I can do to help”).

3. Feedback. For 5-10 minutes, the confiding partner tells the supportive partner:

- how satisfied they were with the support that was offered.
- what else is needed to feel better and cope more effectively.

Swap roles with your partner and repeat the three steps.

This worksheet is designed to help couples deal collaboratively with chronic, minor stressors in a supportive and encouraging manner.

What to Do

Each partner takes their turn in the confiding role and the supportive role. When you are the confiding partner, answer the following questions. Then, role play with your partner. Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner.

1. Explore.

Describe what happened.

What thoughts and emotions did you have during and after the stressful experience?

Why was this situation stressful?

2. Support. Now, allow your partner to offer support, then answer the following questions.

Describe how your partner exhibited empathy, understanding, and reframing.

Did your partner give you practical support? Why or why not? Describe.

3. Feedback.

How satisfied are you with the support that was offered? Explain.

What else is needed to feel better and cope more effectively?

Did this exercise help you cope with the stressor you discussed with your partner? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you better support your partner? Why or why not?

When you were in the supportive role, what (if anything) did you find difficult? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
