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Top Stressors for Couples

“Stress either begins or ends up in the relationship”

Overview of Stress

In today’s fast paced society, it is impossible to avoid stress in our lives. A recent poll of 1,000 U.S. adults found 47% of respondents feel more stress today than they did 6 months ago. The number one source of stress cited in the poll was “personal finance concerns” (Booth Research, 2008).

Stressors are external events which cause an emotional or physical reaction. The impact of the event depends on whether one views the event as positive or negative. When stress levels are high or chronic, it is common for physical symptoms (headaches, backaches), psychological symptoms (anxiety, anger) and relational issues (conflict, disconnection) to emerge.

There are 2 basic ways to cope with stress:

- Eliminate the stressor. Some stressors represent things that are controllable (working too many hours). In some cases, it is possible to make choices that actually eliminate the stressor (change jobs).
- Change one’s reaction to stress. When a stressor cannot be eliminated, it is important to look at how one reacts or copes in response to the stressor. Learning and using healthy coping mechanisms can help individuals respond to stress in healthier ways.

Stress and Couples

A recent study of 82 couples demonstrates how high stress levels can negatively impact marriages (Neff & Karney, 2009).

- The greater the stress levels, the more strongly partners react to the normal ups and downs of life. In other words, when stress levels are high, we experience perceived slights more intensely.
- The study also suggests high stress levels make it more difficult to effectively use one’s positive relationship skills such as communication and conflict resolution abilities.
- Finally, couples are more likely to evaluate their relationship negatively when they are experiencing prolonged exposure to stress. High stress negatively colors a couple’s perceptions of their marriage.

Personal Stress Profile

The new Customized Version of PREPARE/ENRICH incorporates a 25-item stress checklist adapted from the Coping and Stress Profile, which was originally developed by David Olson and

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Ken Stewart at the University of Minnesota in 1995. The 25 items were chosen from their original list of 50 personal stressors faced by most individuals in our modern culture.

While taking their inventory, individuals are directed to read through the checklist and indicate how often each of the 25 items has caused them stress over the past year. The five point response scale ranges from “Never” to “Very Often”. Based on the responses, a Personal Stress Profile is generated and displays each partner’s individual stress level and the top ten stressors for each individual. An item must be checked as being stressful “Sometimes”, “Often”, or “Very Often” to be included in a top ten list.

Customized Version Tailored to Relationship Stage

A defining feature in the Customized Version of PREPARE/ENRICH involves content being tailored to fit the stage of the couple, and this approach is used for the Personal Stress Profile as well. There are dating, engaged, and married versions of the stress checklists which are automatically selected as the couple answers the initial background questions in their inventory.

Top 5 Stressors for Couples

Based on results from the first 20,000 couples to complete the Customized Version, the top 5 stressors for each relationship stage are listed below. Overall, married couples report higher stress levels than dating or engaged couples.

Dating Couples	Engaged Couples	Married Couples
Your job	Your job	Your spouse
Feeling emotionally upset	Financial concerns	Your job
Inadequate income	Cost of wedding	Feeling emotionally upset
Your partner	Lack of exercise	Inadequate income
Too much to do around the home	Lack of sleep	Too much to do around the home

Married Couples and Stress

Note the item rated as the number one stressor by married couples is *Your spouse*. This was the number one stressor cited by both the men and the women. Married couples who take PREPARE/ENRICH are often being seen in a counseling situation. It is not uncommon for individuals experiencing relational conflict to believe their problems would be solved if their partner would only change. Not only do they believe this, they often express it. Experienced counselors are used to the finger pointing which often accompanies the initial sessions of marital therapy. Unfortunately, one partner cannot change the other and this approach leaves individuals totally disempowered in the relationship. In fact, the more one individual focuses on the other person’s behavior, the more resentment, anger, and resistance they typically receive in return.

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It is much more productive to help these couples work on things that are in their control including the way they speak to one another, the way they resolve conflict, the way each individual chooses to react to their daily stressors and interactions with their spouse.

Wedding Stressors and Engaged Couples

Ten of the 25 checklist items for engaged couples are specifically associated with wedding planning and target the stressors couples typically face as they plan their “big day”. Engaged couples are typically embroiled in the countless details of planning their wedding service and reception. They are also faced with the pressures of a very high price tag

In many ways, planning a wedding provides the first big set of decisions a couple will make together and tests their ability to function as a team. From finances to family, and communication to conflict, the wedding preparations trigger many of the issues a couple will face throughout their married life providing a symbolic practice field for their relationship. In looking at the initial data, the *Cost of the wedding* is the number 3 overall stressor for engaged couples. Two other items from the wedding items also made the top 10; *Decisions about wedding details* was number 7, and *Feeling overwhelmed by wedding details* was number 10 out of the 25 stressors reported by engaged couples.

Skilled PREPARE/ENRICH facilitators often leverage a couple’s wedding stressors and issues to provide them with relevant feedback and education. Rather than asking the couple to imagine how finances will be handled in their future marriage, they engage the couple in a discussion of how they are making financial decisions right now as they plan their wedding, reception, and honeymoon.

Male/Female Differences

On average, the data shows women report slightly higher stress levels than men. Men and women also report slightly different sources of stress. Many couples are not aware of how much stress their partner is feeling, nor are they aware of one another’s sources of their stress. The data suggests men in all stages are stressed about jobs, finances, and their partner. While the women highlight some of those stressors, they also report they have *Too much to do around the home* and are often *Feeling overweight*. Notice the item, *Feeling emotionally upset*, makes the top 5 for both men and women in the dating and married relationship stages, but does not make the top 5 for men and women who are engaged. Below is a summary of the top 5 stressors for men and women broken down by relationship stage.

Dating Men Top 5 Stressors	Dating Women Top 5 Stressors
Your job	Feeling emotionally upset
Inadequate income	Your job
Your partner	Too much to do around the home
Feeling emotionally upset	Feeling overweight
Job security	Your partner

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Engaged Men Top 5 Stressors	Engaged Women Top 5 Stressors
Your job	Financial concerns
Financial concerns	Your job
Fiancé stressed out by wedding planning	Cost of wedding
Lack of exercise	Lack of exercise
Lack of sleep	Decisions about wedding details

Married Men Top 5 Stressors	Married Women Top 5 Stressors
Your spouse	Your spouse
Your job	Feeling emotionally upset
Inadequate income	Your job
Feeling emotionally upset	Too much to do around the home
Job security	Feeling overweight

PREPARE/ENRICH Couple Exercises

The new *Couple's Workbook* includes three exercises devoted specifically to the topic of stress.

- The first, *Identifying Most Critical Issues*, is a core exercise designed to help couples take a logical approach to prioritizing the issues they face and consider what they can actually change as they work together.
- The *Balancing Your Priorities* exercise functions almost like a time budget, allowing couples to explore how balanced they are between work, personal, marriage and family demands. It also helps them set goals for making adjustments to their daily time demands.
- Finally, the *Wedding Stress* exercise presents important insight in the form of five helpful strategies for dealing with the issues that naturally arise when planning a wedding.

5 Tips for Using the Personal Stress Profile

1. **Build understanding and empathy:** Help couples identify and discuss the source of their stress, making sure they each understand what their partner is feeling and experiencing.
2. **Prioritize stressors to tackle first:** Use the *Identifying Most Critical Issues* exercise from the workbook to help couples discern which stressors they have control over and can actually change if they work together and support one another. If their partner is a large source of stress in their lives, help them understand they only have control over themselves and their own reactions to one another. They cannot make the other person change.

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3. **Consider the relationship stage:** While engaged couples may be distracted by wedding details, their current stressors can present a good context to build insight and skills into how the rest of their relationship will function, even after their wedding. Meet them where they are at instead of trying to get them to imagine future scenarios.
4. **Use the stress discussion to transition to other skills building:** Keep in mind that the best ways to cope with stress often involve other core relationship skills such as healthy communication, conflict resolution, flexibility, and closeness. An effective approach for dealing with the issues identified in the Personal Stress Profile will often include teaching couples to use these other important skills, and the stress profile functions as a good transition tool for teaching core relationship skills.
5. **Teach couples to take a Time-out when needed:** As the research suggests, high stress levels make it more difficult for couples to effectively use their relationship skills. Teaching couples the *How to Take a Time-Out* exercise may also be important for helping them slow down, gain perspective, and actually use the skills they've been taught.

References:

Neff, L.A., and Karney, B.R., (2009). *Stress and reactivity to daily relationship experiences: How stress hinders adaptive processes in marriage*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97 (3), 435-450.

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