

## **PFSP Perspectives: *Alberta Doctors' Digest***

### **Relationships: What works for physicians?**

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What do we know about what works well in personal relationships?

- What challenges does our marriage face if one of us is a physician or both are?
- What can I do to increase the chance my partner will care and listen to what I'm saying?
- Is it important to be influenced by his or her opinion? What about when we disagree?
- What can we do to feel more of the fondness that brought us together in the first place?

There is a lot known now about relationships that are working well, thanks largely to the research of Dr. John M. Gottman and his many colleagues.

For more than 30 years they have examined couples and learned much about constructive conflict, what nurtures a couple's connection, and how they find a shared purpose through the years.

A grand overview of these areas follows and I invite you to explore them through the resources provided.<sup>1-6</sup>

Drs. Wayne and Mary Sotile are psychologists who have spent their careers working with physicians and increasing an understanding of what is challenging in physicians' personal relationships. Their book, *The Medical Marriage*, is practical and valuable.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Conflict**

"Can't live with you, can't live without you." Not "you," your partner, but, you, conflict.

According to Dr. Gottman's findings, this would be more accurate when it comes to conflict in thriving relationships as, "We've gotta live with you so let's make it the best possible."<sup>1</sup>

Every relationship over time will have conflict. Research tells us only 31% of our conflicts can be considered solvable. This leaves 69% as ongoing areas of disagreement.

It seems with whomever we make a match, we will need to live with our differences, which are at the heart of these chronic conflicts. The first step to living with them is recognizing our differences in personality, some values and needs, and expecting these differences to endure.

Having a way to talk about them when they cause conflict is how thriving couples cope. If we can “be on the same team” when we approach these issues and “yield to win,” our relationship can be victorious in defeating the differences that could pull us apart.<sup>1</sup>

As for the solvable problems, there are specific skills that work to get past them.

- Being able to deliver a message in a way that increases the chance your partner can hear it and care about it. Sticking to speaking up for yourself using “I” statements is one of the best ways to avoid blaming, which will turn off your partner.

“When I see/hear this, I feel this and I need this.” A gentle delivery is one of the most important communication skills practised by couples who are doing well.<sup>1-4, 5</sup>

Research backs this up in an astonishing finding. The tone of the first three minutes of the conversation predicts accurately the outcome of the conversation, as well as the likelihood of the couple remaining together happily.<sup>1</sup>

- The next skill starts with an attitude – the belief that my partner has a right to be influential in our relationship. This means his or her opinions, feelings and needs are important and deserve attention and consideration.

This is really an attitude of respect. This is not a requirement to agree with or even experience the same feelings or needs but to hear him or her out and accept him or her, even while we disagree (gently!).

Dr. Gottmann’s resources provide important information about these and other ways to make conflict constructive.<sup>1-6</sup>

## **Friendship**

Remember when you met your loved one? Typically, when we meet, we cannot get enough of each other. We invest energy to spend time together, we are curious about each other, we look for ways to have fun together.

As the years pass and the responsibilities and to-do list lengthens, we do not invest in our relationship in the same way. We can become strangers if we do not keep updated on who our partner is.

The key to knowing your partner is asking open-ended questions. Who and what’s important to you at this point in life? What are you excited about? What are your worries?<sup>5</sup>

For most couples, especially if they have children and both work outside the home, much of their opportunity to connect will be in day-to-day life.

Finding ways to spend time together that fits with the weekly routine is key. Many couples find

time to talk by sharing the homework, dishes, home and yard maintenance, and child-care responsibilities.

Going out as a couple can seem intimidating if out-of-touch. But finding ways to get out and relax or have fun together, as a twosome, is one of the best opportunities to nurture the friendship.

### **Creating shared meaning**

What dreams do you share? What do you or your partner want to accomplish before you die?

What is most important to you, as a couple, to teach your children? What would you like to be known for as a couple?

These are the kinds of issues thriving couples know about each other and work towards.

So how does this apply to a relationship when one or both people are physicians?

As a married physician myself, and as a couples therapist, I find this material applicable to physicians in the same way as non-physicians.

We can best apply this to our own lives by asking ourselves questions like:

- Can we disagree agreeably?
- Do I speak to my partner or spouse with the same kindness and respect I offer colleagues?
- Do I speak up clearly but gently from my perspective or am I quick to point the finger at my spouse?
- Am I willing to share power in this relationship or do I prefer to “give orders” as I do at work?
- Am I truly open to my partner’s point of view and preferences?
- Are we both aware of our differences and willing to accept them, figuring out a way to live alongside them in a win-win way?
- What do I know about what is going on in my partner’s life and how he or she feels about it?
- When did we last go out as a couple and spend time relaxing or doing something we found fun?
- Do my partner and I share hopes and dreams for the future and what are they?
- How do I make sure I have time and energy for our relationship?

Calls regarding intimate relationships are among the most common reasons people contact the Alberta Medical Association’s Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP).

Although there are no perfect people or relationships, we are here for you, to help you have comfortable and satisfying relationships with whom you choose to spend your life.

## *References*

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