

Relationships and Your Health

Relationships are important

“Do you have someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk?” “Are you married or living with a partner?”

How a patient answers questions like these can affect how he or she recovers from heart disease. We all know it is important to have friends and to be able to talk comfortably with people for our mental health. But this is also good for our physical health too. In fact while we know it helps to have a good marriage, what is most important is that we have a solid trusting relationship in which we let our guard down and are very open about things we would not share with just anyone.

This does not come easy for many people.

How open are we?

Even if we do have someone we know we can trust to be open and accepting, it can be hard to actually do the sharing. Sometimes we use the excuse, “I just don’t want to trouble my spouse. She (or he) already has too much going on.” We know that most of the time, this is an excuse we use because our spouses usually really want to know what is going on in our minds and hearts.

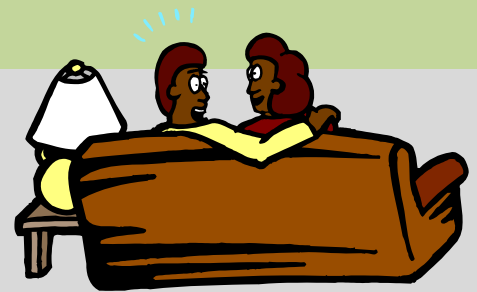
So why is it so hard? When we let our guard down, it does make us feel more vulnerable, but in the end, as we share openly in those relationships that we trust, it really makes the relationship stronger, and safer. Taking those first few steps of vulnerability calls for the strength to make our relationships and hearts stronger.

Don’t forget to listen...

Of course, when we open up and share with others, we really want them to listen well to us. That means we need to listen well to them when they share. To really listen well, we need to keep in the front of our minds that the person who is sharing almost always just want to share what’s going on in their hearts and be validated.

It is easy when someone is sharing with us to quickly come up with ways to solve that person’s problems. We want to give advice, or run interference for them by getting in the middle of the situation to go and settle the issue ourselves. When we respond this way, even though we mean well, really are more invalidating and diminishing to the other person than they are helpful.

We can let the person know we are trying to listen well by responding to the feelings he or she is likely experiencing during the sharing. We can say, “Wow, this sounds like a really hard time you are going through.” or “I’ll bet you were really frustrated when that happened.” We are not offering solutions, we are responding to feelings that may not even be spoken.



What Science Tells Us

When women, aged 30-65, were socially isolated and lacked emotional support, the blockages in their heart’s arteries grew 2-3 times faster than in the women who were more emotionally healthier.

Wang HX, et al. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*. 2006;75(2):96-102

Men and women who were in satisfying and supportive marriages had better blood pressure than those who were single or in bad marriages.

Holt-Lunstad J, et al. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*. 2008 Mar 18

Cardiac patients with lower functional social support are likely to die sooner than those patients with more of this support.

Barth J, et al. *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 2010 72(3):229-38

What are we supposed to share?

Feelings is a good start. Usually it is much easier to talk about our thoughts instead of our feelings. We are much more likely to talk more about plans we are making, or the weather, or even politics instead of using words like excited, calm, proud, grateful, or even less pleasant feelings like embarrassed, empty, threatened or timid. If we are going to talk about these feelings, we need to be open and strong and trusting.

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The Psychosocial Risk Factor Survey

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