



# CARE FOR SELF



## Maintaining Physical, Sexual, Emotional, and Spiritual Wellness

### Introduction

Healthy, stable relationships not only help to produce better mental and physical health in individuals, but are also a result of better individual health. Incorporation of a healthy lifestyle can be just as influential to relationships as communication, connection, and other relationship-based factors. While continuing to devote attention to the couple is important, bolstering individual strengths is central to supporting couple relationships as well. It is difficult to encourage health in others or our relationships when we are not healthy ourselves.



Individual wellness involves both the absence of illness or unhealthy habits and incorporation of healthy habits and behaviors into one's lifestyle. Personal well-being involves physical, sexual, emotional/mental, and spiritual domains. Devoting attention to these areas in our lives can foster creation and maintenance of healthy relationships.

### Physical Well-Being

Investments in physical wellness can benefit the individual and the couple relationship. Three main areas that contribute to general physical well-being include: healthy eating, physical activity, and sleep.

- **Healthy Eating.** Poor and unhealthy eating habits (both overeating and eating too little) are directly related to several health related illnesses. The aim in nutrition education is to promote healthy eating as an investment in individual well-being, which can also influence couple well-being. One way individuals can improve their eating practices and strengthen their family relationships is by eating meals together. Meals that are consumed in a positive, supportive family context (as opposed to alone) tend to be more nutritious. Shared meals can also be rituals that are psychologically supportive and enjoyable.
- **Physical Activity.** Getting the appropriate amount of physical activity contributes to a large number of health benefits. Some relationship patterns can influence this, as a lack of family support is often listed as a barrier to becoming more physically active. To address this, couples might consider adding joint

#### *What "Care for Self" Looks Like*

- Eating healthy and exercising regularly
- Setting regular sleep and wake times
- Noticing and appreciating the good things in one's life
- Finding ways to serve and use one's strengths
- Looking for the positive meaning in one's life
- Managing stress in healthy ways

physical activity to their lives. The mutual support and companionship gained by joint physical activity has been linked to continuing increased physical activity as well as greater relationship satisfaction and commitment.

- Sleep. All individuals need the right amount of sleep to be healthy. Either too little or too much sleep is associated with health and emotional problems. Patterns of sleep are as important as amount of sleep, with disordered sleep patterns (e.g., frequent awakenings; inconsistent sleep/wake-times) contributing to individual and relationship dysfunction.

### **Sexual Well-Being**

Sexuality is an important part of the couple relationship. Most people report that satisfaction with their sexual relationship is connected to their overall relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction with sex is related to how open partners are about their sexual desires and feelings, how they communicate about sex, and the balance of power in the relationship, which are all important parts of couple functioning.

Professionals should also educate clients about other types of sexual health, such as preventing STIs/HIV, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and intimate partner violence. It is imperative that couples practice safety, avoid risks, and not pressure one another in their sexual relationship.



### **Mental and Emotional Well-Being**

There are several facets of mental and emotional well-being that help us know what individuals should strive for when incorporating healthy habits into their lives. Though

#### ***Integrating “Care for Self” into Child Welfare Services***

- Encourage individuals to identify the stressors in their lives and consider how they typically cope with those stressors. Are any of the coping mechanisms unhealthy? If so, help the individual make an action plan for curbing that behavior and incorporating healthy coping into his/her life. Point out ways that partners and family members can support the person with carrying out the plan. Identify barriers to achieving these goals and ways to get past them (e.g., ways to be physically active in a dangerous neighborhood; inexpensive ways to eat healthy).
- If a client is clearly struggling with mental or physical health issues, have an open conversation with them about this. Are they currently getting help for the problem? Do they need referrals to practitioners that can assist them?
- Have couples think of ways that they can collectively encourage better mental and physical health within their families. If they do not get enough physical activity, have them list fun ways to incorporate this into their lives. If they are facing many stressors, have them identify ways to de-stress and relax that they would both/all be willing to try.

## Why “Care for Self” Matters to Child Welfare Services

- When parents are able to care for themselves, they are more likely to be able to provide proper care for their children. Stressed out and unhealthy parents are less likely to focus attention on children and may turn to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse, to feel better. This may ultimately lead to child placement outside of the home.
- Children pick up eating, exercise, and sleep habits from their parents and family environments. If parents do not maintain proper nutrition and get enough sleep and exercise, children are unlikely to as well. These habits could last long into adulthood and cause problems throughout a child’s life.
- Taking in a foster child, especially one with several challenges and needs, can be highly stressful. Foster parents may need help with managing stress to be able to care for the child while also meeting the needs of other family members.

certainly not exhaustive, the following list provides important domains of personal well-being that are highly relevant to relationships.

- **A Positive, Optimistic Perspective.** Individuals who are well-adjusted tend to report greater overall optimism and positivity. Those who are more positive and optimistic also tend to fare better in relationships, both in selecting a partner, having positive interactions, and remaining in such relationships.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindful individuals are engaged in and aware of their surroundings. Rather than focusing on stressors/negative events that they have experienced in the past or have yet to experience, they are able to put such thoughts aside and focus on the current moment. They attempt to live in the “now”. They also are able to focus on their strengths and utilize them in their everyday lives as well as in relationships. Mindful people also tend to be more flexible and willing to consider alternative perspectives. Increased mindfulness is related to greater individual wellness and relationship satisfaction.
- **Emotional Regulation.** A strong indicator of mental well-being is the ability to regulate emotion. Emotion regulation refers to the ability to influence how we experience, express, and respond to emotions. Individuals who are not able to successfully regulate their emotions often have extreme behavior; they may overreact to emotional situations or completely repress their feelings and appear detached. The ability to regulate one’s negative emotions during conflict (e.g., through self-soothing strategies such as humor or reframing the situation) appears important for long-term relationship success.
- **Coping with Stress.** Well-adjusted people use positive, rather than destructive, forms of stress management. When it comes to stress, individuals may need to take time for themselves before they can care for others. Examples of destructive stress management techniques that lead to poor adjustment include substance abuse and unhealthy eating habits. Healthy ways to cope with stress include exercise, relaxation, and talking with a friend or partner.



## Spiritual Well-Being

Spirituality is important to a person's overall wellness, and religion is important to the everyday lives of many people. Individuals who are more religious or spiritual are happier, score higher on various measures of mental health, demonstrate lower involvement with risky lifestyle choices, and have higher levels of social support. Couples who are dissimilar with respect to religious beliefs have demonstrated higher levels of conflict whereas those who share religious orientations have higher levels of marital adjustment. While spirituality and religiosity can be manifested in a number of ways, whether it is meditation, participating in religious services, reading poetry in nature, prayer, etc., couples can help strengthen their relationship by investing in this domain of wellness.



## Health Concerns and Relationships

Individual mental and physical health problems can have serious consequences on the quality of romantic relationships, just as relationships can impact individual health. For example, individuals who struggle with mental illness, such as depression, can also face challenges in their relationships related to their mental health. Symptoms of an individual's illness can spill over into the relationship and cause harm. Negative thoughts that accompany depression can become focused on a partner's shortcomings or relationship troubles. Issues inherent to the relationship may not be worked out unless one's depression is also addressed. Partners can be involved in this process, which can be beneficial to both the depressed individual and the relationship.

Physical health problems can also harm relationships, especially if they are recurrent. Having to deal with ongoing health issues can become a significant stressor for families. Families may have to devote time, energy, and money to care for an ill individual. Partners may not know how to address the health issue or fear potentially severe negative outcomes (e.g., death) with the ill partner, which can lead to isolation rather than connection. Couples may need assistance in learning how to cope with such situations together and identifying local resources to support them.

## Summary

Strong, stable relationships are comprised of healthy interaction patterns between the couple and healthy lifestyles of the individuals in the relationship. The mental and physical health of both partners affects couple interactions and overall relationship quality. Taking care of a relationship simultaneously requires taking care of one's self—physically, sexually, mentally/emotionally, and spiritually.

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