



Honey, I'm Home: Strengthening Your Marriage Ten Minutes at a Time

Eric Walker, Ph.D., USU Extension 2009 Summer Intern
Jana Darrington, M.S., USU Extension, Utah County, FCS Agent
Naomi Weeks, M.S., USU Extension, Weber County, FCS Agent

Research Based Objective

Strengthen your marriage relationship by making the first ten minutes of your interactions together a positive experience. Learn how to have stress-reducing conversation, emotionally support each other, and sooth self and partner in positive communication patterns.

Application/Activity

Make the first ten minutes together a positive experience. Do not bring up problems, criticism, complaints during this time.

Introduction

Doug and Amy have been married for six years and have two children together, ages four and 18 months. On Thursday evening at about 5:25 p.m. we find the following scenario played out in this household.

Amy is chasing after her energetic four-year-old, Daniel, who with his characteristic carefree attitude has pulled every single piece of recently folded laundry from the basket and strewn it around the living room. Meanwhile, one-year old Adam is hungry and crying, adding to the noise and commotion in the home. Amy is feeling worn out, today especially, and frustrated that the plans she had for dinner won't be ready by the time Doug reaches home in a few minutes. Doug has been working so hard lately, and she wanted the house to be in order, and a nice dinner ready for him when he walked in the door.

Doug is a hard worker, and knows his supervisor appreciates him. However, he is feeling additional stress from a team project he is leading. Today, he found that a critical part of the project he thought Joe was doing hadn't been started and his supervisor was angry with

Doug. As he turns the corner toward home, he is anxiously planning what he needs to do the next day to get the project back on schedule. He hopes when he gets home, he can relax with Amy and the kids, enjoy a nice dinner and some family time, and then start fresh the following day.

Now, consider your own coming-home events. What feelings and thoughts do you experience as you prepare to see your spouse? Are they positive, negative, or mixed? Do you feel peace, additional stress, or excitement? Many couples have similar experiences to Doug and Amy, sometimes several times a week. This can occur when one or both spouses come home from work, school, or other activities, or even upon getting up in the morning. We often do not realize that these first ten minutes of interaction are an opportunity to set the stage for the rest of the time we spend together that day.

Following are reasons why this first ten minutes is critical to developing a healthier, stronger spousal relationship as well as specific ideas to make this time together a positive experience.

Support in Stressful Times

First, recognize that stress is a fact of life. Too much stress, however, can negatively impact our ability to interact with our spouse in healthy and supportive ways (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In healthy relationships, routine, mundane connections can help couples feel safe turning toward each other to reduce the stresses created from life experiences (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Stress-reducing conversation and activities can strengthen your relationship with your spouse. These can include conversation about almost anything – except problems in the marriage or with the spouse. Topics may

include big or little things that happened during your time away, including joyful moments and/or challenges you experienced. For example, it may reduce Doug's work-related stress to talk to Amy about his challenges with Joe and his supervisor. He may also choose to relate the funny story about the prank Steve and Linda played on Sam at work. Amy, as the listening spouse, needs only to pay attention and respond like a friend that is on their spouse's side (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In Amy's case, even though she is frustrated her day has not gone as planned, she can tell Doug how funny it was to watch Daniel putting on his daddy's shirts (every single one!) and running around. It is important, however, for Amy not to blame Doug for the stress she is experiencing. This will create additional tension for both spouses.

Additionally, activities such as helping a spouse finish the dishes, refold the laundry, or a giving a quick back rub may also promote positive feelings. The specific activities depend on what each spouse enjoys or their needs at the time. This will help each partner unwind and de-escalate from the pressures of the day, making stress more manageable and allowing continued interactions that are less influenced by the earlier stressors.

Positive Communication Fosters Positive Emotions

By spending more time in positive communication patterns, you can increase the positive emotions you feel toward your spouse. When individuals anticipate feeling positive emotions around their partner they are more likely to look forward to being together; but in contrast, unfavorable anticipation of being together can actually create negative emotions and diminish or eliminate the desire to be together (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When couples create patterns of positive hellos and healthy initial interactions, positive feelings of friendship and love grow. Spouses look forward to being together as allies and sources of strength in the struggles of life.

Friendship, healthy partnerships, and alliances are built on trust. As spouses develop habits of turning towards each other for stress reduction, relationships of trust will be strengthened. This provides a strong foundation for creating healthier and stronger marriages (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

As you consider your own situation, you may wonder how you can best utilize these ten important minutes. The following are suggestions:

1. Prepare yourself mentally. When anticipating seeing your spouse after an absence, mentally prepare to give your spouse and family the best of yourself. There are likely problems and challenges that need to be discussed, but the

problems and challenges will still be there later. During the first ten minutes, focus on having a positive initial greeting (i.e., starting off on the right foot) with your spouse. Later as a team, you will be able to address any problems and challenges more constructively because the negative emotions of the day will be decreased and the positive emotions of being together will be increased. Think of specific things you can say and/or do that will help make those first minutes a positive experience.

2. Understand the power in a smile (Gladstone & Parker, 2002). Smiling in and of itself can have a powerful impact on others' reactions (Mackey, 1976) and their desires to connect with you (Guéguen, 2008). Even though the house may be a mess, you are exhausted from running after the children, and dinner isn't ready yet, prepare to give a glowing smile to your partner. Your spouse will be better able to put aside his or her own stresses and focus on a positive connection with you. And you just might find that you feel better and can see the humor in the situation if you smile (even when you don't exactly feel like it)!
3. Focus on the needs of your spouse first. Genuine interest in your spouse's daily stresses will foster greater love and emotional connection (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Attempt to put aside your own issues for the moment and focus on reconnecting with your spouse, asking about his or her day, listening and responding positively. If both partners willingly commit to do this for their spouse, everyone will end up a winner!
4. Be prepared to help your spouse. Inevitably there will be times when your spouse is not prepared to optimistically greet you because of emotions associated with their specific life challenges. It can be easy to get angry, pull away, or become critical, but these are actually the best times to build trust and strengthen your relationship. You can do this by helping your spouse calm the overwhelming emotions (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Although you cannot fix all the struggles or change the negative emotions your partner may be experiencing (nor would your spouse probably want you to), you can provide key support by listening, empathizing and letting your spouse know you are on their side (Gottman & Silver). The daily struggles of life are rarely pleasant, but they can provide opportunities to develop patterns of turning towards each other, supporting each

other (Voydanoff, 2005), and building trust and reliance in the relationship.

Conclusion

When Doug walks through the door, Amy calls, “Hello dear” and comes around the corner with a smile. Doug responds with a smile, tousles Daniel’s hair (who is still wearing Daddy’s shirts), picks up Adam and says, “It was a little frustrating. It sure looks like you’ve been having some fun here. How can I help, honey?” Amy gives him a hug and says, “Sounds like we need to chat about your day first,” and pulls him to the couch to sit and chat. After briefly explaining about his day, Doug says, “What can I do to help you?” Amy asks him to begin refolding laundry while she gets dinner on the table.

Creating a positive interaction in the first ten minutes of being together is not the only answer for creating healthier and stronger marriages, but it can have an important influence. As patterns and habits are created to make the first ten minutes of being together a positive experience, couples can look forward to being together, better support and trust each other through times of stress, and create a stronger, healthier marriage.

At-Home Application

It makes good sense to get input from each other on what you feel builds an emotional connection and reduces stress (Gottman & Silver, 1999) during the first ten minutes. Each spouse should individually make a list of the activities you currently do (or have done) together that you enjoy. These can range from a simple hug or kiss to helping to make dinner. Next, add to the list

activities you *wish* you would do during the first ten minutes, or wish was a more emotionally connecting activity. Finally, choose three that you most wish your partner would do with you and discuss them together – but not during the first ten minutes! Sometimes this activity can generate conflict. Remember the purpose of this exercise is to express to your partner the fact that you love and appreciate him or her, so communicate these ideas with this in mind. Together, you can generate a list of positive ideas to help make the first ten-minutes with your spouse a wonderful experience.

References

- Gladstone, G. L., & Parker, G. B. (2002). When you’re smiling does the whole world smile with you? *Australian Psychiatry, 10*, 144-146.
- Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Guénguen, N. (2008). The effects of a woman’s smile on men’s courtship behavior. *Social Behavior and Personality, 36*, 1233-1236.
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N., (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research, *Psychological Bulletin, 118*, 3-34.
- Mackey, W. C. (1976). Parameters of the smile as a social signal. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 129*, 125-130.
- Voydanoff, P. (2005). Consequences of boundary-spanning demands and resources for work-to-family conflict and perceived stress. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 10*, 491-503.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran’s status. USU’s policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran’s status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.