

After the Storm: *Building a Strong Marriage*



After the winds calm, the rains stop, and the waters recede, the loss from a natural disaster is obvious. Homes can be damaged, crops destroyed, jobs lost, and people killed. But one of the victims of any hurricane, tornado, or flood could be your marriage. Skills and assets that are needed to build a strong marriage can be destroyed in the disaster along with the couple's patience with each other.

Is there ever such a thing as a strong marriage? Yes, there is. One of every four marriages is considered a very strong marriage. This strength could be related to spouses' similar backgrounds, goals, and values. Part of the success of these marriages can be attributed to personality type. Those of us who do not have perfect marriages can work to build stronger ones. Just as crops must be tended, you must work on your marriage to achieve happiness and satisfaction.

How can a storm damage a marriage? The natural emotions that you have after a serious disaster can destroy even the strongest marriage. Your shared history can be washed away along with your home and your photos.

The kindness and positive attitudes that are so important in a relationship can be damaged by the negative emotions generated after a trauma. Some of these emotions are anger, anxiety, irritability, and nervousness. Also, there are feelings of being overwhelmed and not knowing how to begin building back. The frustration and stress that mount following a disaster can break even strong marriage bonds.

What are the skills you need to build a strong relationship? Commitment, positive thinking, communication, respect for differences, affection, kindness, understanding, and shared purposes are some of these skills.

Commitment - There is a big difference in "I will try" and "I will do." Saying "I will do" is a commitment. Any relationship has ups and downs. A couple needs to accept that there will be hard times and then learn to work through them.

Most couples are happy when their marriage is in an up cycle. The relationship is not as acceptable when the marriage is in a down cycle. To make the marriage work you must be committed and work hard during the down times to keep the marriage going.

One way to keep your commitment strong is to keep the relationship primary and make your couple time a priority. Uninterrupted couple time can give your relationship needed strength. It is extremely difficult to devote uninterrupted time to your marriage if you have been displaced due to damage to your home or your community. If the two of you are in a shelter or staying with family or friends, privacy is hard to come by.

You need to remember that in any committed relationship, rituals must be built. Yes, you have **family** rituals, such as your traditions during the holidays, but couple rituals are important, too. Examples of **couple** rituals are time spent together washing and drying dishes, taking a walk, or swinging in the porch swing. These rituals allow couples time to talk about activities of the day. If established rituals can no longer be continued, it is very important to build new rituals that can carry your marriage through the process of rebuilding your lives.

Positive Thinking - Positive thinking is "looking for the good" in life. For example, you probably have had an automobile. Think about that car. There were some

things you liked about it and some things you did not. If you thought only about the things you did not like about your car, you would not be very happy with it. But if you thought mostly about the things you did like, you would enjoy your car more. So, you need to look for the good.

In the same way, you will be happier if you look for the good things in your partner. For example, your spouse may have a good sense of humor, be able to repair things around the house, or be good with the children.

The same thing is true about your relationship: look for the good. It could be that you both enjoy the same hobby or the same type of movies. Whatever it is, look for the good in your relationship and dwell on that. This can be hard to do when you are upset, irritable, and in a difficult situation. But if you think positively, you will be happier with your partner and relationship most of the time.

Communication - Communication is very important in any strong relationship. Communication includes glances, touches, expressions, emotions, and words. During difficult times, it is very important that you and your partner communicate support for one another in each of your preferred methods.

It is essential that you consider the timing of your communication. Under normal circumstances, it is best not to discuss difficult topics when situations or moods are negative. After a disaster, almost all situations and moods are negative. Therefore, timing is even more crucial. Some things do not need to be said until you are feeling rested. When you are in a better frame of mind, you can solve problems in a more productive way.

Respect for Differences - Spouses may react to tragedy differently. One may want to rest and withdraw; the other may need to talk. One may want to make jokes, the other to cry. It is important to respect your spouse's reactions, even if they are very different from yours. It is important to remember that different people use different coping skills following tragedy.

Affection - Affection is an important part of a strong marital relationship. For people to understand each other, they have to speak and understand the same language. The same thing is true in how you show your love and affection. You must use the language of love that your partner understands, not the language of love that you understand.

So how do you show affection? There are several ways. One is to "show me." Some people want to be shown things because things are important to them. Others want to be shown action because actions or service is important to them. Some people want to be told because the words are very necessary. Another way is "touch me." To that person, human contact is

essential. Another way is "spend time with me." For those who value time spent together, couple time is critical. When you are overwhelmed or rushed and have all your emotions affected by disaster, it is easy for the normal methods of affection to be overlooked. As previously mentioned, in a shelter or another's home, privacy is hard to come by. It is important, however, to make the commitment.

Kindness - It takes a conscious effort to be kind, especially when you are nervous, angry, and depressed - but at no other time is it as important. Common courtesies that you normally extend to strangers are sometimes forgotten when dealing with your partner. You may say thank you to a stranger and forget to say thank you to your partner.

Everyone has an "emotional bank account." In those accounts, deposits are made when good things happen and withdrawals are made when negative things occur. Noted marriage therapist John Gottman says it takes five positive deposits to balance one negative withdrawal. For example, you would have to tell your spouse "I love you," make a very special meal, wash and wax the car, take them out to dinner, and cuddle on the sofa to make up for the one time you used harsh language.

Anger is often a result of stress and trauma. It is very easy to turn that anger toward your partner. You need to remember, though, that your partner is the last person toward whom you should direct your frustrations. Being angry at the situation **together** can help build unity. Anger at one another makes everything harder.

Understanding - It helps to have understanding - to see the world through your partner's eyes. Listen to their history, thoughts, and point of view. That will enable you to understand their perception and to see the situation through their eyes. Your partner could have, buried deeply in his or her history, reasons for actions that you cannot understand. Once you really communicate, you understand these reasons. It is very beneficial to listen and learn intimate details about your partner during the good times so that you can draw on this knowledge when times are bad.

Shared Purpose - Each individual in the relationship needs to have their own interests and goals, but it is also very important to have shared goals and interests. Couples need to recognize each other's service to the community and family unit.

One important goal after disaster is rebuilding the family's life. Couples must work together and make joint decisions to achieve this goal. Even though it is difficult to envision a bright future when you are bogged down with anger and frustration, you **can** build a new life with your partner.

So, look for the good things in your marriage and think positively about your partner. When you communicate, show affection, and show kindness and understanding, you can have a strong marriage - even after the disaster. You may have lost your home and belongings, but you still have each other. It would be a true tragedy to let the disaster ruin your relationship with your partner.

Additional Reading:

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail . . . and How You Can Make Yours Last* by John M. Gottman; *Reconcilable Differences* by Andrew Christensen and Neil S. Jacobson; *Intimate Partners: Patterns in Love and Marriage* by Maggie Scarf

Adapted from the following publications: *Strengthening Your Marriage*, *Communication with Your Partner*, *Understanding Builds Marriage*, *Kindness Builds Strong Marriages*, *Forgiveness*

in a Strong Marriage, *Learning Languages of Love in Marriages*, *Dealing with Conflict in Marriage*, *Getting Past Problems to Solutions in Marriage*, and *Applying New Marriage Research to Making Better Marriages*, all by H. Wallace Goddard, Ph.D., CFLE, Extension Family Life Specialist, University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service; *When Crisis Becomes Chronic*, *Dealing with Stress After a Disaster*, and *A Flood of Emotions* by North Dakota State University Extension Service; *Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism* (Second Edition), edited by Garret D. Evans and Brenda A. Wiens and prepared by the University of Florida National Rural Behavioral Health Center; *Marriages & Families: Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths* (Fifth Edition) by David H. Olson of the University of Minnesota and John DeFrain of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and *Establishment and operation of shelters serving socially vulnerable populations: A socio-spatial analysis* by Lynn Pike, Ph.D., Mississippi State University

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