

Want to help your partner stress less? Listen from the heart

February 7 2018, by Kim Mcgrath



Credit: Wake Forest University

When we feel supported, we feel less stress. But sometimes we think we are being supportive of a romantic partner and we're not. Who hasn't experienced the self-satisfaction of feeling like we're 'helping' only to find we've only made the situation worse.

Wake Forest communication professor Jennifer Priem studies dating relationships and explores the connection between supportive conversations and physiological signs of [stress reduction](#).

Using saliva samples, Priem can measure changes in stress by determining when cortisol levels rise and when they fall as a result of support conversations between dating partners. Cortisol is a stress hormone that, when over active can cause heart disease as well as other health problems such as headaches, sleep problems, and concentration impairment.

A supportive [partner](#) has the power to reduce the levels of cortisol by taking specific actions that help calm tension and reduce stress. Supportive communication can alleviate distress and improve a partner's emotional state.

"The fastest stress recovery comes from explicit messages," says Priem.

Other features of supportive communication that have been shown to reduce stress include:

- Acknowledging the person is under stress and experiencing a problem. We are generally most willing to give high quality comforting when we can interpret the stress at the same level as the person needing support. Even if, and maybe especially when, you don't think the other person should be stressed, he or she still needs support. "If your partner is feeling stressed, telling him or her 'don't worry about it' or trying to distract the person from the stress by changing the subject is generally not going to help," Priem says.
- Using verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, such as listening and asking questions, making eye contact, nodding and touching, can cause cortisol levels go down, and there is often a

reappraisal of the problem by the person who is upset.

- Listening and understanding is support validation and turns off strong emotional responses by legitimizing feelings. We often feel the need to say the right thing or fix the problem, but most often when people are stressed they want emotional support, which mainly consists of listening intently and asking questions. Unless someone specifically asks for advice, do not offer it. Once you validate their feelings, people may ask for advice, but they have to be ready to hear it.
- Adjusting your approach as needed. It's possible that as a support provider you may think you are providing good support. But good support isn't good unless the person receiving the support perceives it as helpful.

"Cookie cutter support messages don't really work," says Priem. "Stress creates a frame through which messages are interpreted. Support that is clear and explicit in validating feelings and showing interest and concern is most likely to lower [cortisol levels](#) and increase [feelings](#) of wellbeing and safety. If you aren't seeing improvement in your partner's anxiety, you may need to change your approach."

The benefit both partners will receive from engaging in effective [support](#) goes beyond the immediate stress recovery after the conversation. The result of prolonged exposure to [stress hormones](#), such as cortisol, is wear and tear on the body. Because the rate of physiological recovery after exposure to everyday stressors and hassles results in more or less cortisol exposure over the course of a lifetime, supportive communication that accelerates [cortisol](#) recovery, even slightly, may have longer health benefits. Thus, individuals who are able to facilitate faster [stress](#) recovery for their partner create immediate and long term relational and health benefits, strengthening the relationship and the individual.

Provided by Wake Forest University

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