Maintaining Healthy Relationships while Raising a Child on the Spectrum

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Maintaining healthy relationships is not an easy task. Marriages and partnerships take constant effort and communication. Couples who are raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or with any other kind of special need, face extra challenges and stress. Each relationship has value and can be strengthened even in challenging times.

Fatigue is one of the most common problems for parents who raise a child on the spectrum. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to be focused on the special needs of a child day after day. The constant planning of routines, the school meetings, the therapy sessions, the worry, the handling of outbursts and the sleep disturbances all contribute to an overall fatigue. The emotional fatigue and the physical fatigue can be overwhelming. The most important part of building a healthy relationship, and of taking care of your child, is to **place a high priority on your own physical and mental well-being**. If you do not take care of yourself, it will be impossible for you to contribute to a relationship and be an effective parent. This can appear to be a challenging, if not impossible, task. Who will take care of my child? How will I get a full night's rest? When can I get some time to myself? Each person's response will be different. Perhaps it will require a tag-team approach with your partner in order for you to have a quick nap, or you may need to call on a relative to watch your child for a few hours. Respite care may be a viable option. The key is to ensure that you are well-rested, well-nourished and get some exercise each day. The best way to make an investment in your family is to make an investment in yourself.

Lack of intimate communication is a common problem in many relationships. It is often magnified, however, when couples are raising a child on the spectrum. All relationships thrive on a steady flow of intimate communication. In a household with special needs, the conversations can too often be directed to solving problems and scheduling appointments. Such conversations do not foster closeness with your partner or maintain intimate bonds. If parents do not make the conscious decision to have intimate communication, the conversations about *stuff* will gradually take over. In order to ensure that a relationship is continuing to develop and flourish, each couple should engage in two different "talks" each week. The first talk is the *stuff talk* in which the family (or partnership) can discuss the details of day-to-day life. Who is going to pick your child up from piano lessons? Which therapist did you prefer? What time is the individualized education plan (IEP) meeting on Tuesday? There is so much that needs to be coordinated when raising children, especially when raising children on the spectrum. These items should all be covered in the *stuff talk* each week. In addition, each couple should **schedule time to have a *heart talk***. This conversation should occur at least once a week and should ideally occur on a different day than the *stuff talk*. During the *heart talk*, the couple should discuss their feelings and emotions on their relationship. This isn't a time to talk about the children or the details of the schedule. It's a time to be vulnerable and to express joy, sadness, anger, frustration, satisfaction and any other emotions. It will draw you closer to your partner and help ensure that emotional baggage does not build up. There is a tendency in families with special needs children to delay talking about intimate things because they are so busy with the details of daily life. But if maintaining a strong and healthy relationship is a priority, a weekly *heart talk* is essential.

HOW TO BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

1

Relationships thrive on communication about deep emotions. As mentioned above, the *heart talk* is essential to building a strong relationship. During these conversations, each partner must learn to communicate in a healthy way. For example, it is common and natural for individuals to get angry at each other. The problem is not the anger itself. The problem is when individuals express their anger with yelling, aggressiveness and hate. Of course, it's equally harmful to suppress anger or negative feelings as they may present themselves as drinking alcohol, an eating disorder or watching too much television. The longest journey that any human being ever makes is 12 inches – from the head to the heart. When people are able to go from talking from their head (schedules, details) to talking from their heart (emotions), there will be wonderful consequences. Relationships will thrive when people can say exactly how they feel. Raw and direct statements of emotion are the lifeblood of relationships. Difficulties arise when individuals do not know how to communicate their fear or their sadness. Effective communication involves learning to be at ease with your emotions and voicing them in the same tone you would use to talk about your day. It is not always easy. However, it is absolutely essential to ensure a flow of spoken communication with your partner if you are interested in building a strong relationship.

2

Criticism and blame eat up a tremendous amount of energy in a relationship. It can be exhausting for an individual to feel that he or she is wrong all the time. However, blame is instinctive and there is a strong tendency in humans to project blame. If people in a relationship can cure themselves of that habit, tremendous progress can be made. My wife and I both came from families where criticism and blame were a constant. Parents and siblings were always pointing the finger at someone else. In our early years as a couple, we naturally fell into these habits as well. We would make negative comments and blame each other when things went wrong. One weekend, my wife's parents came for a visit. They spent the entire weekend bickering with each other. After they left, my wife and I decided that we did not want to engage in such negativity. We agreed to eliminate blame and criticism from our lives and from our marriage. It took us years to accomplish this goal. With effort and hope, we were able to move forward with positivity.

3

It is important for every person to fulfill his/her creative passion. We all have a creative passion inside us. For one person it might be playing a musical instrument. For another person it might be reading, drawing, cooking, or going for a walk in nature. Yes, you are a parent of a child with autism, but you are also an individual who must satisfy your own need for happiness and well-being. Your happiness will help you to be a better person, partner and parent. With every breath you take, you choose between creativity and monotony. We all need to examine our behavior because there is a tendency to slide into the humdrum: eating the same foods all the time, doing the same activities day after day. Each person needs to shake himself/herself up creatively. Money and a successful career will not bring happiness if you are not doing the things you truly love to do. Pursue your creative passion, and you will begin to notice a change in yourself. You will be more fulfilled and better able to express your emotions clearly to the ones you love. You will also be able to take better care of your child, and to build a strong and lasting relationship with your partner.

I recognize the challenges facing parents who are raising a child with autism, and I salute their heroism. They show tremendous dedication and love as they work each day to raise strong and resilient children. Be well, take care of yourselves, and build strong and lasting relationships that will carry you through the good times and the bad.



Gay Hendricks, Ph.D, has been a leader in the fields of relationship transformation and body-mind transformation for more than 45 years. After earning his Ph.D from Stanford in 1974, Dr. Hendricks served as Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Colorado for 21 years. He has written more than 40 books, including bestsellers such as *Five Wishes, The Big Leap, Conscious Loving and the new Conscious Loving Ever After*, (the last two written with his co-author and mate for more than 35 years, Dr. Kathlyn Hendricks). He is also a mystery novelist, with a series of five books featuring the Tibetan-Buddhist private detective, Tenzing Norbu. Gay has appeared on more than 500 radio and television shows, including Oprah, CNN, CNBC, 48 Hours and others.

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