



Two Important L's

Laughter and listening are two necessary skills for dealing with life's stresses.

by Kindra Gordon

Ever notice how just when you think you have life by the tail and things are going well, something stressful tends to happen? You aren't the only person that happens to.

Val Farmer, a longtime psychologist serving farm families in North and South Dakota, and Juli Burney, an assistant professor of communication and theatre at Doane College in Lincoln, Neb., both chalk life's imperfections up to the fact that they are normal and daily occurrences.

"Stress doesn't take a vacation. Particularly in agriculture, there continue to be ongoing struggles every day — be it drought, or prices, or whatever," Farmer says.

Burney agrees. "Snags happen in life every day. We've just got to learn how to approach them and to take them in stride," she says.

Keep your sense of humor

Part of the "stride" she's referring to is to have a sense of humor about the things that happen to us in life. "If you buy into someone else's crabbiness, you take on that negativity," Burney says. "That's your choice. But if you approach things with a sense of humor, you choose to be a winner, and you can avoid that negativity."

She adds, "We have choices in our own head we can make of how we view our life. We need to feel good about ourselves mentally and physically because a happy person is a productive person."

Burney, who travels the country as a motivational and humorous speaker in addition to her teaching duties, also promotes the idea that being able to like and laugh at ourselves combats fatigue and alleviates burnout. She has even found research that shows how



laughing for 15 minutes a day provides benefits to the heart and respiratory system that are equivalent to 15 minutes of jogging every day.

"Don't go through life crabby and mad," she says. "We have to learn to take care of ourselves, keep communicating and lighten up."

She emphasizes that life is meant to be enjoyable and fun. To that end, she points out that as children, we all have an innate sense of humor, and we tend to laugh easily at things. But as we grow up, we hear a lot of negative thinking and, over time, we lose our laughter and don't take it with us into adulthood.

"We are so overloaded planning ahead in life. We don't bring humor with us enough," she says. Instead, Burney suggests, "We need to quit beating our self up for what we are doing wrong, and start giving our self credit for what we do right. Live in every moment and enjoy every moment, because we don't know when those moments will be taken away from us."

Listening equally important

Along with a light-hearted attitude, Farmer says finding a good listener — someone to confide in — is also important in dealing with stress.

"Everyone in life needs at least one confidant," he says. "People want a listener."

What happens when we confide? Farmer says studies have shown the act of confiding is healing, it reduces loneliness, and helps clarify comprehension.

"You shouldn't bear your troubles alone. A hidden blessing in a tragedy is that someone often turns to a confidant — and for farmers it sometimes takes a crisis to find or turn to their one confidant," says Farmer, who has helped rural families deal with stress and challenges through his syndicated newspaper

advice column during the past two decades, and as a guest on the national radio call-in program Agri-Talk News Network.

During his years of visiting with families, Farmer says one of the primary problems he has noticed in relationships is too much avoidance. "People need to communicate to solve a problem," he says. "We also need to become better listeners. It can be freeing to talk about stress and struggles."

How do you learn to confide? Farmer admits it is a skill that needs to be practiced. He suggests spending 20 minutes a day in non-problem talk with your spouse or partner. As part of this process, Farmer says non-verbal communication is also important to show that you are interested and emotionally concerned.

Having these connected conversations will minimize growing apart in your relationship, but, he adds, "This time needs to be scheduled so you get into a routine of doing it."

Of the importance in confiding to your spouse or partner, Farmer says, "You need to be on the same side, so you can fight the real dragons of the world. There are too many other problems in the world that are real instead of people taking it out on one another.

"When trust grows in a relationship, you become good at conflict resolution between one another, and you know difficult issues will be handled well and with a breath of kindness," he adds.



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