



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Healing Family Relationships

"You don't get to choose your family," is a common saying heard everywhere. Oh, but you do get to choose how you relate to them.

Although growing up you had good times and bad times, it is those painful moments that sometimes come to define your relationship with your loved ones. This is especially true for women, who sometimes are overburdened with the duties of keeping the peace in families and solving all the problems.

A recent set of articles published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* indicates that emotions can create a chain reaction of distress that moves through a family and affects the behavior and health of individuals and can lead to such things as anger, anxiety, and depression.

"Difficulties in relationships trigger childhood and other past wounds that require healing. Unfortunately, most of us do not embrace these struggles," says Patricia Murphy Carlson, a marriage and family counselor. "Instead we tend to avoid them or set up defensive reactions that end up damaging, not only ourselves, but those around us."

Unfortunately, past wounds can continue to hurt you. The *Journal of Marriage and the Family* states that negative emotions appear to be more potent and have longer lasting effects than positive emotions.

For your health, it is important to take time to reexamine your relationships.

### Reinventing family relationships

Learning how to relate to our families takes work—a lot of it.

There isn't a formula that can fix all relationships, but there are steps that can make relationships healthier—not perfect, but more manageable and even enjoyable.

Letting go of expectations is key, says *Enriching Family Relationships*, a newsletter published by the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Family Life Specialist. "Our expectations are responsible for a great deal of our grief and stress. Since life is rarely exactly the way we expect it should

be, we spend a lot of time feeling disappointed, constantly wishing life were different."

Changing your expectations of how you relate with your loved ones will allow you to begin anew and establish healthier relationships. Keep the focus on yourself and your behavior and reactions. Remember, you cannot change others, but you can change yourself.

Here are some suggestions for repairing and maintaining healthy relationships:

- **Communicate.** This is the single most important component in relationships. Share your feelings in a positive way and don't keep angry feelings to yourself. Communicate directly and not through a relative, which can further complicate things.
- **Learn to identify and express emotions.** As women, we often learn to pay more attention to others' feelings and deny our own feelings and experiences. While this often results in very good sensitivity to others, we may neglect sensitivity to ourselves. Stop each day and identify emotions you are or have been experiencing. What triggered them? How might you affirm or respond to them? Try keeping a daily feelings journal to put them in perspective.
- **Allow yourself to feel angry.** It is usually helpful to find productive ways to vent your anger. This can be done in support groups or with good friends. Try writing a letter to the relative who hurt you, even if you don't mail it.
- **Know when to accept help.** If the problems between you and your estranged family members are too big to handle, seek counseling from a psychotherapist or a minister. This will help you think more clearly about what is going on, and give you the support you need to try out some new strategies.
- **Forgive the people who have hurt you.** Forgiveness allows you to escape being trapped and bound by negative emotions and move on with your life.
- **Redefine manipulative relationships.** If any of your family members manipulate you in any way, set specific rules to relate to them in a healthier manner. You cannot solve everyone's problems and everyone needs to contribute to the family's well-being.
- **Know when to let go.** If you have tried to save a relationship, but it continues to hurt you, you may need to consider letting go, even if temporarily. Being relatives does not mean that being good friends is a given. Both parties must be willing to make it work. Give it your best, but know when to say enough.

By reevaluating your relationships and focusing on the positive, you and your family can find a better path to healthier communication.

For more information on how to heal family relationships—from alcoholism to abuse, from blended families to anger management—try these contacts:

- National Women's Health Information Center: [www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov) or (800) 994-WOMAN
- Al-Anon: [www.alanon.org](http://www.alanon.org) or (888) 4AL-ANON
- Rape Abuse & Incest National Network: [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org) or (800) 656-HOPE
- Stepfamily Association of America: [www.saafamilies.org](http://www.saafamilies.org) or (800) 735-0329
- Anasazi Foundation: [www.anasazi.org](http://www.anasazi.org) or (800) 678-3445
- To read more of Enriching Family Relationships, visit [www.ianr.unl.edu/ianr/fcs/efr.htm](http://www.ianr.unl.edu/ianr/fcs/efr.htm)

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*