

## Company news: Health communication lacking among South African couples

More results from the first ever healthy relationships survey have been released with respondents reporting that healthy communication is sorely lacking in the majority of relationships.

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Furthermore, only 33% of respondents reported that their partner is able to express anger in a non-destructive manner. As South African couples are in the midst of celebrating Valentines Day, relationship expert Dr Caren Hadders, believes that this is a serious issue that warrants attention.

“Most couples believe there is only one ‘winner’ in an argument, and their communication revolves around getting their own view across. In actual fact, constructive communication has no winners or losers. It's about giving each party an opportunity to have their say, and for the other party to listen and reflect on what is being said, up until a point when both can understand the other's point of view,” says Dr Caren Hadders, a general practitioner and sexologist. “Often in therapy we spend more than half of the therapy session teaching couple's step by step regarding how to communicate”.

Dr Hadders says that she finds the ‘Imago’ methodology an excellent but ‘intensive and committed’ way of learning to communicate effectively. She recommends that couples find out more about Imago Relationship Therapy, especially those couples who want to enrich their current relationship, those whose relationship is on the rocks as well as those in a difficult relationship who want to resolve intense conflict.

According to Thomas B Haller, a couples` therapist from Michigan in the United States, a couple's choice of words and style of communication are critical to the level of intimacy, connectedness and trust that is created with a partner. “An undeniable link exists between the words you choose to use and the emotional health and well being of your relationship. The way you talk to your partner, what you say, how you say what you say, can impact the degree of respect and caring that is present. The language skills you use with your partner affect how you solve problems, how you resolve conflict, and the level of trust you generate in your partnership,” Haller says<sup>1</sup>.

When communication is limited and conflict is not easily resolved, this directly impacts on intimacy within a relationship. Seventy four percent of respondents said that they were unhappy with the level of intimacy and affection in their relationship and 52% of respondents said that intimacy in their relationship is not what it used to be. Until communication improves, intimacy in these relationships could continue to be affected. This survey also showed the general naivety that exists about certain sexual dysfunctions that could further impact on intimacy within relationships.

Ninety one percent of respondents did not agree with the fact that men can have a problem achieving an erection, and a further 95% were not aware that there are a number of effective treatment options for a condition such as erectile dysfunction (ED).

Not only can ED prove to be an intimacy problem physically (Accepted global estimates state that erectile dysfunction occurs in 52% of males between ages 40 and 70), but with poor communication, especially when the couple are not willing to discuss any sexual problems within their relationship, this can exacerbate

the problem and prevent the couple from seeking help.

Dr Hadders was very surprised at these results from the survey, particularly where erectile dysfunction was concerned. "With the increase in the awareness around ED over the last few years, I thought that ED would have become a household term by now. What this survey shows me is that the results have to do with human nature – the 'it will never happen to me' syndrome. The truth is that 50% of men over 40 years of age will experience some degree of ED. My approach is to treat the ED as early as possible, so as to restore the man's sexual self confidence and to protect the relationship from the destructive effects that ED can have."

"The public often struggles with not knowing which medications or treatments for ED are scientifically proven or approved. My suggestion is to speak to your doctor about this," Dr Hadders says.

This survey, which was sponsored by pharmaceutical company Lilly in the interest of healthy relationships, also revealed that 86% of respondents said that they are not able to easily express their thoughts and feelings in their relationship, and only 29% said that they are able to resolve conflict in a mature way.

With the physical and emotional closeness of a partnership, it is inevitable that there will sometimes be conflict. It may be a sign that something is wrong or that someone in the relationship is unhappy. Avoiding conflict or ignoring the problems could mean that someone is choosing to avoid talking through important issues or exploring the underlying reasons that have caused the conflict. Some advice from the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia states that when people choose to acknowledge their anger, they can then take steps to resolve the problem as quickly and calmly as possible<sup>2</sup>:

Admit that you are angry and let your partner know how you feel by bringing the problem out into the open (without trying to hurt them).

Give yourself 'cooling off' time if you feel that you or your partner is too angry to talk about the problem.

Remember to come back to the issue later and try to sort things out.

Explore your true feelings. Conflict is usually the end result of a build-up of underlying feelings and unresolved issues.

Listen to your partner's point of view. There are two sides to every story.

Acknowledge and take responsibility for your part in the problem.

It is also important to reflect together on what you can learn from conflict. This helps to strengthen your relationship and lessen the chances of a similar conflict happening again.

Last month it was revealed that results from this survey also showed that only 10% of respondents feel that they are 100% committed to their respective partners and 85% do not perceive their partner or spouse to be their best friend. Sixty percent of respondents felt that their sex life was unexciting and an alarming 90% of respondents believe that their partner could have an affair.

According to the Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA), the family is the nucleus of society and when it weakens or crumbles the stability of the entire community is adversely affected. It is thus imperative to initiate and co-ordinate resources to maintain a healthy and happy marriage and family life. See [www.famsa.org.za](http://www.famsa.org.za) for more information about this organisation's role in empowering people to build, reconstruct and maintain sound relationships in the family, in marriage and in communities<sup>3</sup>.

The healthy relationships survey, designed with input and assistance from Dr Caren Hadders, only took a few minutes to complete and was run towards the end of last year to evaluate the state of South African relationships – not only where sex is concerned, but also to analyze issues such as communication and romance.

For more information, go to [www.36hours-of-freedom.co.za](http://www.36hours-of-freedom.co.za)

References:

- 1.Haller TB. The importance of Communication (<http://www.thomashaller.com/pages/couples3.html>)
- 2.Relationships – dealing with conflict. Better Health Channel. Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation Australia [http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Relationships\\_dealing\\_with\\_confli](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Relationships_dealing_with_confli)
- 3.FAMSA – Family and Marriage Society ([www.famsa.org.za/about .asp](http://www.famsa.org.za/about.asp))

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