

Differing Stress Responses

You have likely heard of the ‘5 Love Languages’ by Gary Chapman. Do you also know that differing partner stress responses affect your relationship similarly to love languages? What is a stress response? We’re glad you asked. It is a reaction that occurs in your body that is meant to keep you safe in *emergencies* and includes physical and mental responses to perceived stressful situations.



Consider these scenarios (among endless others) that can cause high stress. (1) You work in the military and your responses to time-sensitive tasks make a difference to mission execution or failure, and in some cases life or death decisions. (2) As a leader, mission execution depends upon your ability to problem solve, empower, and lead people. (3) On a personal level, there’s a family situation that weighs heavily upon your mind/heart, or perhaps a COVID-induced stress is affecting your workplace, paycheck, family, or inner community circle.

A few common stress responses include: *behavioral* changes in activity levels, including difficulty communicating, inability to relax, change in eating habits, hyper-vigilance; *psychological/emotional* reactions including denial, anxiety, fear, moodiness, apathy; *physical* changes including increased heart rate, tremors, trouble hearing, body aches/pains, easily startled; *social* changes including withdrawal, difficulty listening or problem solving, blaming, or criticizing.

The list of behaviors above all apply to relationships. Our stress response(s) can press our partner into a reactionary position (i.e. ‘What do I do now that my partner is acting differently?’) Additionally, suppose you both are going through significant stressors and are experiencing significant disconnection. If you find yourself in these situations, consider the suggestions from familylife.com to bridge differing stress responses:

- **Know thy stress response (and thy partner’s).** What do you do when you’re stressed? What are your go-to cycles when stressed? What friction do I create when pushed to the brink? In a positive light, a stress response can bring strength to a relationship when we understand ourselves and our partner. One can be more available, respond more effectively, and offer partner sympathy during stress.
- **Neither you nor your partner is the enemy.** Sometimes stress responses put us on the defensive/offensive and our partner as adversarial. Many of us associate stress responses to weakness, imperfection, or failure. Stress responses can cause people to question their relationships. Instead of readying for war with your partner, consider partnering as Wingman.
- **Us versus the problem (stress).** How can I help you cope? How can I help steer you away from poor stress responses? How do I make your stress more difficult? Join forces and tackle the situation together!
- **Love who you are together.** Stress messes with perspective, resilience, and makes us more sensitive. The tendency is to view one’s relationship as flawed or broken during stress. Consider another viewpoint, what we make it through together makes us stronger together, more mature, more experienced – scars and all. Compliment your partner, rub their shoulders, offer a word of positive reflection how the relationship made it through stress.



If you find yourself still needing an assist, your ART is here to support you.