

10 Tips for Coping with Your Partner's Upset

While it is vital to a happy marriage that you support your partner through their pain (whether directed at you or someone else), it can be hard to listen.

The following tips can help you be there without being overwhelmed (or flooded):

Step 1 – Acknowledge the difficulty

Make it clear to your partner that you are keen to work through the upsetting issue, but handling their negative emotions is proving difficult.

Step 2 – Find techniques to self-soothe

If you feel flooded when you listen to your partner, you most likely need to end the discussion now. Otherwise, there is a risk you will either explode or shut down.

You may need to take yourself off and calm yourself. Perhaps focus on controlled breathing or a mindfulness exercise.

Taking such a break can be essential to avoid escalating the situation.

Step 3 – Remind yourself that your goal is to understand

Listen, and *hear* what is being said. Do not attempt to solve the problem or minimize their feelings.

Step 4 – Explore the problem

Use open-ended questions and exploratory statements to show support while gaining a complete understanding.

For example:

- What are your concerns?
- What is your worst-case scenario?
- Tell me how you are feeling.
- We have lots of time, go on.

Step 5 – Avoid “Why?”

Asking ‘Why?’ will take you down the problem-solving route – avoid it.

Instead of “*Why do you think that?*” ask “*Help me understand what you are feeling.*”

Step 6 – Show you are there for them

Witnessing another person’s distress can often be as simple as letting them know you understand their feelings and why they feel that way.

Step 7 – Use your partner’s language

Try and use your partner’s language. For example, if they are talking in metaphors, use the same or similar ones.

Step 8 – Avoid trying to cheer them up

While it is tempting to try and remove the pain with levity or humor most often your partner is looking for you to be there and listen.

Step 9 – Do not suggest they ‘calm down’

Following on from point 8. Your partner feels justified in their annoyance; they want you to listen and not be told to calm down. For similar reasons, phrases such as “*don’t be silly*” are more likely to escalate the situation.

Step 10 – Understand what is missing

Upset is often based on loss. Ask where the sadness (or other emotion) is coming from, or whether they feel they have ‘lost’ something.

Dr. Jeremy Sutton