


#8: Building and Maintaining Relationships in Stressful Times - Communicating Effectively

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Megan Roberts: Welcome to this session of our Cultivating Resiliency for Women in Agriculture podcast, series one. The Cultivating Resiliency project develops tools for women in agriculture to recognize, adapt to, and develop positive coping strategies to life's stresses. This podcast series is developed from our Cultivating Resiliency webinar sessions. I'm Megan Roberts, and I co-lead this project along with Doris Mold.

Today, we feature Shauna Reitmeier and Brenda Mack as our session hosts. Both are professionals in behavioral health with ties to farming. In this session, we build off our last podcast, where we learned signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Today, we move on to discuss ways we can build positive communication into our relationships, from active listening to conflict resolution.

Brenda Mack: Part of healthy communication is active listening. Do you listen to understand, or do you listen to respond? And so many of us, I think, fall into that category of, "All right, I do have this. My mother-in-law and I are talking, and all I keep thinking about is how I'm going to respond to the things she's saying to me," instead of just slowing down and being present in the moment, and calming your brain a bit to actively listen and engage and be present with what your mother-in-law might be saying without going three steps ahead to think about how you're going to respond to that. And when that happens, there's so many verbal and non-verbal cues that you can be giving to your mother-in-law, such as nodding your head or paralinguistic cues like, "Mm-hmm (affirmative)."

Brenda Mack: And again, that's a way to strengthen and build relationship. It's a piece of communication that helps to nurture those healthy relationships.

Shauna Reitmeier: And so when we go into conversations, we go through a thought process when we hear information. So we've done active listening, and you're going in and you're being present in that situation. There is a process that we go through in making decisions or taking action. And this is called the ladder of inference. We hear information, we take in data, and that is a new information. And in the course of, say, a conversation with someone, we're going to take bits and pieces of that data, of that information that we've had,

words that were said, body language that we saw, we're going to take those pieces, and we're going to apply meaning to those. When we apply meaning to that, and that comes based on our previous experiences that we've had, our cultural and personal values that we have, and we put that meaning on it, and we make assumptions based on the meaning. And when we make assumptions, it's easy for us to draw conclusions, and we adapt that conclusion to our beliefs, and we take action off of that. Now, we can use this ladder of inference in active listening. And so it's really about, how do we be a detective in asking as many questions as we can? Because what it's easy to do is to start creating these stories in our head. And we want to be Nancy Drew. We want to be a detective in asking our questions when we're doing active listening. So then, you're doing active listening, we're using the ladder of inference, we're asking questions. We know that there are times that there's going to be conflict in a relationship. We know that that is normal, that we want to use those skills of active listening to address whatever the conflict is.

And what's important in that, when there is conflict, is focusing on the problem, what's that issue? What is the problem? Because what it does is it separates it from the person. It's not, "My husband." It's whatever the behavior is that they may have done, that you want to use those reflective listening skills. Use the active listening and reflect on what it is that you're hearing, and ask those questions around whether or not, "Did I hear you right? Did I understand that? Is that the meaning you have? Because this is the meaning that I am hearing or I am applying." Always ask those questions, and use those I-statements. "I feel incompetent in the business when my mother-in-law isn't telling me directly what she's saying." So this conflict might be happening. It might happen over and over again in those meetings with the family farm, but we have to use those I-statements.

And, know when to take a time out. If things get heated, if you're feeling really emotional, it goes back to, we've got to be in the right place to have some conversations. If I'm heated, if I have had just an immediate emotional reaction to something, trying to resolve conflict in that moment is not going to be helpful for you. And the goal is then to work towards that resolution, and use your values to resolve that.

Brenda Mack: How can you strengthen your relationships? And again, your relationship is going to be on a spectrum. There might be someone on this call that they really are assessing their relationship and feel like they have a solid, connected, honorable, respectful relationship. And then there may be others on this call that they feel like they're really struggling in their relationships. And so this information, I think, can be helpful wherever you are on that spectrum. And again, it's really based on the theorists, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, and their attachment research, as well as the relationship expert, Dr. Sue Johnson. Again, the point of this is, have some awareness about, where are you connecting

emotionally with your intimate partner, or your spouse? And practice some of those ways to connect. And so, you have to practice it. You have to celebrate your connectivity. And just remember, it takes 21 days to create a new habit. So if you're not in that habit of doing this stuff now, and it feels uncomfortable in the beginning, that's pretty normal.

Shauna Reitmeier: You bet.

Brenda Mack: But keep at it, because again, research says that practice, practice, practice, and within 21 days, you're starting to feel comfortable, and write your new narrative.

Megan Roberts: Thanks for joining us on this Cultivating Resiliency for Women in Agriculture podcast, series one. One of the first steps to improving our relationships with others is to improve our own self-awareness. How are we active listening, making assumptions about intent? How are we refraining from creating an argument or engaging and instigating arguments? Are we honing our Nancy Drew skills, or in other words, being a detective that asks clarifying questions? With these relationship tools, we can build our own resiliency, enabling us to bounce back in the face of adversity and be more flexible to the emotional ups and downs of farming. This project is a collaboration of American Agri-Women, District 11 Agri-Women, University of Minnesota Extension-Women in Ag Network, and the Upper Midwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center, UMASH. You may find the recordings for our entire webinar series on the UMASH, or American Agri-Women websites under Cultivating Resiliency. Our next podcast focuses on ways to put it all together to create a personal self-care plan that fits your unique needs.

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