

## JOURNAL REPORT | ENCORE

**Y**our spouse or partner has high blood pressure, and the doctor has told him to cut back on salt. You walk into the kitchen and see

him shaking a more-than-generous amount of salt on his lunch.

Everything in you wants to scream, "Are you nuts?"

Here's some advice: Don't.

As couples age, and raising kids and work recede into the background, health shifts to the foreground. We're told to cut fat from our diet, or exercise more, or wear sunscreen. But too often, what we say to each other, and how we say it, can determine whether the most desired outcome is achieved.

Such talks are fraught with pitfalls, as many couples are stuck in dynamics that sabotage forward movement. Typically one spouse is healthier than the other, says Tracy Lippard, a geriatrician at Kaiser Permanente near Boulder, Colo., "and that's a source of frustration. But it's also an opportunity to nudge each other in a healthier direction."

Whatever your specific dynamics are, both parties can try these ways to avoid a stalemate.

### Don't nag.

This might be the most important point, the one from which all else flows. It's all too easy to be critical. Do you "remind" your spouse to walk more, or to avoid sweets? Has this worked? Unlikely. And don't ask them why they persist in unhelpful behaviors. It's accusatory, says Mary Sanders, a marriage and family therapist in St. Paul, Minn.

Instead, suggests Sharon Gilchrist O'Neill, a psychotherapist in Ridgefield, Conn., bring empathy to this talk. Wait until you're both in a good mood, and start by expressing your fears or by admitting to errors in your previous approach. Tell them you don't want to nag anymore.



## Stop Nagging!

There are ways to get your spouse to live a more healthy life. And ways not to.

If you get a willing response, suggest that you brainstorm ideas for being safer and healthier. Or just give your spouse a chance to think about what you've said, and don't bring it up for a while.

### Use what you know about your partner.

You probably know your partner better than anyone. If your wife adores her grandkids, point out how much more connected she'll feel if she wears her hearing aids, or what a great role model she'll be if she stays active. If your husband loves nature, suggest the botanical garden.

"Redefine what's active," says

### BY FRANCINE RUSSO

Ms. Sanders. If your spouse grimaces at taking a hike, propose taking a class together. Whether it's ballroom dancing or Egyptian archaeology, it's way better than sitting in front of the TV.

Philadelphia-based clinical psychologist Cindy Baum-Baicker tells of a husband who knew that when he suggested going out for a walk, his wife heard him implying that she was lazy or fat. "He figured out that if he's really gentle and gives her a felt-sense of control, she'd exercise more," the therapist says. "He left it open so that she could approach him rather than feel he was 'looking' at her in judgment."

And it worked. He had happened to mention a 7-minute video workout he was doing and she picked up on it. She liked that she could put it on whenever she wanted and program the number of jumping jacks she wanted to do.

### Employ "tasty" rewards—shamelessly.

You know how psychologists reward mice with a food pellet whenever they press the right lever? This works, whereas berating the mouse does zilch. Whenever your partner acts in a health-enhancing way, say or do something positive. If he takes a brisk walk or she eats a healthy

meal, give him a big hug or tell her how great she looks. So what if they catch on. It still works!

### Ask your doctor to be the "bad guy."

Dr. Lippard says she and the other therapists she works with are happy to do this for their patients. When the health advice comes from a professional, she says, it's less likely to be resisted or dismissed.

### Be prepared to make sacrifices.

Maybe you can eat all the salt you want, but he can't. Take it off the table, says Ms. O'Neill. If you love dining out, but she needs to lose weight, cook more and eat in.

Ms. Sanders knows a couple where the wife offered to take up golf with her sedentary husband although the thought of it made her eyes glaze over. Her husband, who had stopped playing when his golf buddies moved away, was thrilled. Turns out, she loved it.

### If you are the one resisting, consider why, and say what you need.

Think about why you don't want to do things that you know are better for you. Does your partner's advice sound like criticism? Do you get defensive?

Maybe you think you know better what is good for you. Is it possible you can't admit to her (or yourself) how out of shape you've become? Are you embarrassed that you can't keep up?

Many people are so frightened of aging that they'd rather shut out the whole subject. Try opening up about your feelings, especially if you sense a more loving tone coming your way.

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