

How to Nurture a Relationship

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Imagine the following scene. It's been months since you promised to set aside just *one* evening for a romantic dinner with your partner. And now here you are, finally having a candlelit dinner at your favorite restaurant. You gaze across the table, fingers intertwined, and sigh. At last...a quiet moment together...just the two of you...

...then your cell phone/blackberry/pager rings...

The number on the call display tells you it's your boss. "Not again!" you think. Sheepishly, you avoid your partner's look of crushed disappointment, and take the call...

Sound like a nightmare? In my practice, I hear stories like this all the time. Our lives are speeding up, and many people sacrifice their personal time to meet work expectations that in any sane world would be considered excessive. As a result, we neglect our relationships through overwork and overscheduling. Many couples are so busy with their jobs and raising children that the only time they have to really talk is when they are sitting on my couch!

The fact is, many people feel lonely in their marriages, and it need not be the case. It is all too easy to forget that your relationship with your partner/spouse can be your greatest treasure, a place to renew yourself. Even though we all live busy lives, work hard, and get tired, there are some simple ways to promote intimacy, to help make our loving relationships a safe haven in the storm of life:

1. **Set clear boundaries between work and home.** Turn off the cell phone. Let it be known that you are not reachable at certain times. Make it clear that your home life is important.
2. **Listen and respond.** This seems so simple, yet the act of listening with undivided attention (i.e., not keeping one eye on the computer or TV) is one of the things that sustains relationships. Just *be* with the one you love. Ask questions. Show genuine interest. When we habitually fail to respond to each other's bids for emotional connection the results can be disastrous. Research shows that couples in happy relationships respond to each other almost *twice* as much as much as unhappy couples, and that these positive exchanges fill what marital therapist and researcher John Gottman calls the "emotional bank account," the reservoir of good feeling that gives us access to humor and affection, even during arguments.
3. **Show kindness, playfulness, appreciation** - anything that lets the other person know that you understand who they are and what they need. This can be as simple as bringing them coffee, paying a compliment, something as mundane as taking out the garbage (without being asked!), or it can be romantic, like going out for dinner, or hiding a gift under their pillow. Think of your own example, then *do* it some time in the next week.
4. **Schedule pleasurable activities.** Choose things that are do-able and fit your schedule: go for a walk, watch a movie together.
5. **Make departures and reunions meaningful.** When you are rushing to leave for work, pause for a moment to hug your husband to tell him you will miss him. When you get home, hug and kiss your wife. And speaking of kissing, try John Gottman's suggestion: make your kiss last at least 7 *seconds* (as he says: "now *that's* a kiss with potential!").
6. **Plan for sex.** Sex is supposed to be spontaneous, right? Think again. For example, most of us think of sex during courtship as spontaneous, but few of us remember how much we *planned* our courtship. So plan a romantic moment! Set aside time to be alone together.
7. **Practice acceptance.** Some problems are solvable, and some are here to stay. In fact, research shows that the majority of problems in any given relationship are perpetual – they can't be fixed, and will *never* go *away*. Continually arguing about the perpetual issues can burn out a friendship, creating emotional

distance. What to do? Recognize that some points of friction (i.e., differences in neatness, movie preferences) may never go away, but you can learn to talk (or even joke) about them.

8. **Be honest rather than critical.** If you don't like something, say so. But the trick is to complain rather than criticize. Say "I feel..." or "I need..." rather than an accusatory "you never...." You may be surprised at the response.
9. **Share your hopes, dreams, and goals** on a regular basis. Talk about the bigger issues: who you are, what you want from life, what you want for both of you. Be honest. One of the great pleasures in life is sharing your dreams with your partner.

And remember: as human beings, relationships are everything. They are the source of most if not all of the joy and suffering in life. If you follow just *one* of these suggestions, it can make an immediate change in your relationship.