

Seven Simple Changes to Restore Love and Intimacy to Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples come to counseling with many goals and objectives in mind. One of the most common is the desire to restore the positive feelings toward spouse and to feel loved by the spouse. These same couples often go about trying to accomplish this goal by pointing out what their spouse is doing “wrong”, how they “always” engage in undesirable behavior and “never” do the things that are requested.

In trying to accomplish the goal of communicating a desire to feel loved, important, and appreciated, spouses often act out feelings with angry, belittling, demanding, scolding, harassing, or withdrawing behavior. These communication behaviors may be an attempt to say “Pay attention to me. I love you and miss how we used to feel.”, but the message communicated ends up being anything but that.

Very often, spouses are convinced that the other spouse is “the problem”, and that the only possible solution is the other spouse change. They come to counseling in a veritable stalemate. They each refuse to take risks and their own behavior until the other spouse is changing according to their own criteria. They often continue to avoid spending time together and use the same old worn out excuses for doing so.

The reality is that you cannot achieve the goals of restoring the intimacy and positive feelings in your relationship without taking full responsibility for the part that you play in the problems and in the solutions. You cannot make any headway without taking risks, even if it seems that the other person is not changing and is not risking. When partners are able to wake up each day, have gratitude for having their spouse still in their lives, and give consideration to what they can do that day to make life easier or better for their spouse, they will typically begin to see the relationship getting better. Partners often attribute this improvement to their spouse changing, when in fact, both partner are changing and contributing to solutions.

If you want to improve your intimacy and feel better about your spouse and your relationship, do these simple things:

1. Carve out time daily to spend with your spouse. Make time for conversation. Have date nights. Develop a list of fun things to do and get after it.
2. Move from trying to communicate your needs in a hostile, complaining way, to asking directly for what you want or need.
3. Use “I” statements, such as “I want”, “I feel”, and “I need”. Don’t use “I think” because you will probably be telling your spouse about them instead of you. Try to avoid “I feel that/like/as if” because those are probably more thoughts and most likely to be editorial comments about your spouse.

4. Work diligently to understand your spouse's perspective instead of trying to argue him/her into understanding yours.
5. Work to accept your partner for who s/he is, instead of making him/her your "home improvement project".
6. Treat your spouse with the common courtesy that you would treat a stranger. Open car doors, ask if they need anything when you go to the store or the kitchen, use "please" and "thank you", and give complements freely.
7. Do the things that you know help your partner feel loved.

If you think that you have done these things and are still asking "what about me?", you either probably have not engaged in these behavior changes or have not given it enough time. Usually, when I hear a partner complain, "but, I have done all this stuff in the past and it has not worked," I hear the other partner rebut with, "no, you haven't."

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