

Excuses, Excuses, Excuses

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

To restore the closeness in your most important relationship, your marriage, you must spend time together. Almost all couples whose marriages are drifting apart, being torn apart, or dying from neglect, already know this. Yet, they typically do not do the most important thing in restoring the good feelings and closeness to their relationship.

Why? Exactly. The excuses that I hear from couples about why they cannot carve out time to spend with each other vary from the stereotypical to the highly specialized. Most of the time people make excuses rather than doing what they need to do because a) they don't want to do it in the first place, or b) they are afraid of what will happen if they do it. Some have fear of success. Some have fear of failure. Some have fear of change, regardless of the direction that it goes.

What are excuses? We culturally define excuses as justification for some act/behavior or lack of taking some action. Excuses serve to hold the person with the responsibility harmless. It seems to serve as a way to neutralize responsibility.

Eventually in therapy, one partner will get honest and say "I don't want to spend time with you", then describe what s/he is avoiding. Much of the time, partners collude with each other to prevent spending time together by backing up each other's excuses and failing to problem solve on actual impediments. They are usually not consciously in a conspiracy to let their marriage die by neglect, erosion, and active chipping away at its foundations. Yet, that is often the outcome.

When your marriage counseling has asked you to spend more time together and you say, "yes, but....." the next thing out of your mouth will typically be the excuses. To restore the happiness to your marriage, change how you think and increase your willingness to do something different. You cannot change your relationship by doing the same old stuff over and over. It is not working now. It has not worked in the past. It will not work in the future. Doing the same stuff more vigorously probably won't work either. Use this worksheet to explore your excuses, identify real impediments, and to problem solve on those roadblocks that are standing in the way of restoring your positive feelings and closeness.

The Excuses Worksheet
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A. Identify your excuses for not spending more time with your spouse. Write them down. Identify how you and your spouse are complicit in maintaining the status quo.

Categories of Excuses:

Time: “We just don’t have the time because...”:

Kids: “We have kids. We can’t have alone time because...”:

Money: “We can’t afford to have special time together because...”:

Individual awkwardness: “I am uncomfortable spending time with you because...”:

Examples: “We don’t have anything in common”; “I don’t want to spend time with someone who will be criticizing me.”; “We don’t have anything to talk about.”; “I’m afraid if we spend more time together we will discover that we don’t want to be together and will get a divorce.”

Additional Miscellaneous category: “We can’t carve out more time together because...”:

B. Identify how you and your spouse are complicit in maintaining the status quo. Go back through your lists above and identify the ones that your partner reinforces in some way. They may be the same excuses used by your partner or they may be excuses that your partner believes to be “real reasons” why it is difficult to carve out time together. Put a checkmark by those on your lists above.

C. Now go back and identify the items that are actual roadblocks or problems to be solved. At this point it does not matter whether you believe that you can solve it. Just identify the circumstances/conditions/items that are really in the way of being able to spend more time together.

D. Take this worksheet back to your counselor for assistance with problem solving on those barriers. A basic Problem Solving Model guidelines can be used to eliminate the impediments to spending more time together.

(Peggy’s note: This worksheet and any other materials provided by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., are not meant to diagnose or treat any problem or condition and does not serve as a substitute for appropriate professional help. Copyright: 2010, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., <http://www.peggyferguson.marriage-family.com>; <http://www.peggyferguson.com>.