

How To Get Your Spouse To Want To Spend Time With You

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many spouses complain that their partner does not want to spend time with them. There are a number of reasons why the distant partner is not spending time with the other spouse. Some partners are actually avoiding their spouses, while others want that time together, but can't accomplish it. Many actually want to spend time with his/her spouse, but logistical issues create a barrier that has not been resolved or overcome. Some have depression or other mental health problems where social isolation and withdrawal are symptoms. Others may be struggling with extreme stress by themselves. They feel like they are just barely hanging on, without adding "one more thing". Others are prioritizing in ways that leaves the spouse somewhere other than at the top of the list. Still others may be avoiding their spouses because of guilt.

Many partners avoid their spouses due to relationship distress. Much of the time there is ongoing, unresolved conflict in the relationship. One spouse wants to get in there and resolve the problem by discussing or arguing and the other is conflict avoidant. This scenario sets up a pattern of pursuing/distancing, which can become a stable dynamic in that relationship. The pursuing partner may request closeness in ways that are virtually guaranteed to achieve the opposite results. She may be trying to protect herself from further hurt by being indirect with her requests. She may be using some of these communication techniques that will not work:

"You never want to spend time with me. You don't love me!"

“You always act interested in what your mom/brother/secretary is saying, and do not listen to me.”

“You never want to do anything that I want to do. You only want to do the things that you like.”

“It drives me crazy when I have to keep reminding you to take out the trash.”

“We never take vacations or go to the movies. You are so cheap.” (Men are just as likely to be the pursuer and women the distancer.)

These communication behaviors are believed to be requests for time together. Sometimes these indirect ways of asking for time together seem a lot safer than taking the risks to be open, honest, and direct. When a partner says, “I miss you and I want to spend time with you. I need to feel re-assured that you still love me,” the other partner is free to say, “I don’t care; I don’t want to spend time with you.” Because there is not much room for miscommunication, the partner on the receiving end of “I don’t want to spend time with you,” can’t protect her feelings with the perception that the spouse just didn’t really understand. Vulnerability is scary.

However, when a spouse is more direct about wanting time and attention, she is much more likely to have her request granted. When acting out feelings or hinting at the message, it is very difficult to see through what is being said to discover the real meaning. Not only is the distant partner likely to not understand the message, indirect and acting out ways of communicating that message, can create further hurt, anger, and more distance.

Ask yourself what it is like for your spouse to spend time with you. Do a self-analysis to determine if your spouse is avoiding you because of distress in the relationship. Ask yourself these questions:

How good are you at just relaxing into the situation and enjoying the time spent with your partner?

- a. Do you have difficulty relaxing and being mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the moment?
- b. Do you feel compelled to take advantage of his/her attention and bring up your complaints or requests for change?
- c. Do you get easily frustrated or annoyed?
- d. Do you break down in tears?
- e. Do you try to make your spouse feel guilty?
- f. Are you fun to be with?
- g. Do you complain about the service at the restaurant? Do you swear you will never come back to this restaurant/movie theater/performing arts center? Do you embarrass your spouse with your criticism of service or your demanding behavior?
- h. Do you fret about the money you are spending?
- i. Do you have difficulty with paying attention to your spouse when you are out and about?

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j. Do you flirt with other people, make casual conversation with them, or otherwise divert your attention away from your spouse.

k. Do you frequently sabotage your date or get sick so that you have to come home early?

l. Do you talk non-stop about yourself, or do you ask questions about your partner's day, work, interests?

If you find yourself doing some of these behaviors, your spouse may be avoiding spend time with you because it is not fun or enjoyable to them.

So, if you want your spouse to want to spend more time with you, make a direct request without criticism or blame. Then, make the best use of the time spent together— rekindling the positive feelings for each other. You can't rekindle positive feelings by being negative.

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