

The Valentine's Day Gift That Keeps On Giving  
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

The very best gift to give your beloved for Valentine's Day is your time and attention. If you have gotten into the rut of giving a card, roses or chocolates (if you give anything at all), you may have become complacent in your most important relationship. It is easy to settle into a boring, but comfortable routine of work, dinner, TV, bed, and start all over again the next day. Very little real interaction takes place between you and your spouse. If couples want to have a healthy marriage and avoid marriage trouble, the best course of action to take is to pay attention to the marital relationship and not take it for granted.

Couples that are settled into a stable marital relationship that has become stale can utilize Valentine's Day and February as a romantic backdrop to develop their own marriage enhancement initiative. By deliberately attending to their marriage, a couple can re-invigorate and revitalize the energy in their relationship. They can rediscover the romance and the connected sense of "us". This can be accomplished by following the marital advice of devoting time and attention to the relationship.

An initial focus of these marriage enrichment efforts could be well spent by defining and dedicating a special time to communicating with one another. Many times when we hear about couple communication, we automatically think of learning how to fight fair, learning to problem solve effectively, or learning how to listen. All these things are involved in couple communication. However, much of the important relationship interactions that feed the positive feelings in a relationship are the neutral, supportive, or "just connecting" types of communication. These can include holding hands, talking about shared experiences, kind and simple gestures that you do for each other, sharing something you learned or are thinking about, planning for the future, etc. All communication is not conflict oriented. Having fun together goes a long way to restoring positive feelings and a sense of connection and avoiding marriage trouble.

Sometimes when a lot of time has passed without significant interaction in a relationship, it may take a conscious, deliberate attempt to get past the awkwardness to set aside a "sacred time" to devote to the relationship. Yet, to do so, marks the first step in restoration of positive feelings and building or restoring the good marriage. Marriage enrichment approaches might involve a "date night", or a couples' communication exercises like a couples' daily feelings meetings or a semi-structured format like "The Honey Jar". It could also involve a formal marital enrichment program or weekend, or couples' counseling.

When the communication starts rolling again you may discover couple activities that you want to do together, and initiate a routine of those activities (i.e., ball room dance lessons, community little theater involvement, fishing, etc.). Relationships where partners share similar interests, spend time together, and routinely communicate and problem solve tend to have higher marital satisfaction and marital stability over time.

Good things begin to happen in a marriage when couples devote deliberate, conscious attention to the relationship. Partners who dedicate a time for the relationship usually find that the cohesion and commitment in the relationship are strengthened.. Couples, secure in their commitment and in their perception of being loved and supported, tend to feel confident in their ability to weather the changes that their marriage will go through over time. When you are in a happy vs. distressed marriage, not only your emotional health, but also even your physical health is likely to be better.

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