

Building Your Own Marriage Enhancement Initiative

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Routine. Boring. Settled in. Comfortable. You love your spouse. You believe that she and the family are the most important people in your life. You have settled into a comfortable routine, accepting that you are loved and appreciated by your family. Your comfortable routine consists of an ongoing cycle of work, dinner, tv, bed. When you talk to this most important person in your life, your wife, you talk about replacing the roof, what the kids did that day, what you need from the store, or maybe something that happened at work that day. The conversation lasts maybe ten minutes. The reality is that very little real interaction takes place between you and your spouse on a regular basis.

You keep thinking that you want to do something special for Valentine's Day, to really impress upon your spouse just how important she is and how much you love her. What you have come up with so far is the standard roses or heart shaped box of chocolates. Your creative thinking has left you scratching your head in frustration.

If you want to do something creative for Valentine's Day this year, ask yourself these questions:

What has my spouse been telling me that she wants from me—either verbally or in her behavior? Has she been complaining that we never do anything together? Has she said that she misses me? Has she indicated that she wants me to think of something to do, instead of her doing all the suggesting? Has she complained that you ignore her, take her for granted, or are not interested in her? Has she asked you if you think she is boring?

If any of these things are being communicated by your spouse, the vitality of your relationship needs a little jump start. A stable, but stale marriage can become re-vitalized by using Valentine's Day as a romantic backdrop for an individualized marital enhancement initiative. By deliberately devoting time and attention to the marriage, a couple can revitalize the energy in their relationship, rediscover the romance, and repair the eroding sense of "us".

Focusing on the relationship has to involve dedicating special time to spend together. Couples communicate in all kinds of ways besides talking. Interactions that involve supportive, connective behavior such as holding hands, sharing experiences, performing kind and simple gestures, are all relationship enhancing interactions. These interactions communicate feelings of attachment. Having fun together goes a long way to restoring positive feelings and a sense of connection.

It also helps to restore neutral conversation. When couples have been together for a long time, they seem to run out of things to talk about. They have already heard each other's childhood experiences and memories. They have heard each other's political, spiritual, and lifestyle philosophies. Sometimes, to restore conversational interest, it may take a

conscious, deliberate attempt to get past the awkwardness or familiarity to regain the ability to “just talk”. Below are steps to build your own “marriage initiative”:

1. Get together to agree on a "sacred time" to devote to the relationship. Identify a time of day to have daily couple communication time. Identify a day of the week or every other week to set aside for “date night”. Make these times “sacred”, where nothing takes priority over spending time together.
2. Identify things that could get in the way of following through with these efforts. Identify solutions to potential problems, so that you are more likely to follow through (i.e., Get babysitters and have backup sitters planned so that minor problems do not get in the way).
3. Use communication exercises such as “The Honey Jar”, or Couples’ Daily Feelings Meetings, or participate in a marital enrichment program or weekend at church, to get started.
4. As the communication gets rolling, identify a list of potential things that you could do together to have fun (e.g., ball room dance lessons, gardening, volunteer organizations, fishing, etc.). Relationships where partners spend time together, share similar interests, routinely communicate, and problem solve (when needed) tend to have higher marital satisfaction and marital stability over time. Many benefits can be derived from devoting deliberate, conscious attention to the relationship. Some include an increase in cohesion and commitment, improved perception of being loved, and a sense of efficacy that the marriage is able to withstand the stresses and strains over time. People in happy marriages are generally happier and healthier physically than people in distressed marriages.

The process of daily life can undermine your relationship closeness. When you make a conscious effort to regain that closeness through your own marital enhancement initiative you will begin to reap the benefits fairly quickly.

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