

Restoring the Sense of "Us" In Marriage: A Guide for Couples

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Marriage is a team, and as with any collaborative organization, it requires effort and cooperation from both parties. Teams have a shared identity, with icons or mascots symbolizing that collective identity. Couples have a shared identity in their sense of "us." When they lose the sense of "us," they drift apart, leading to a breakdown in communication and intimacy. However, a shift in thinking and conscious effort can restore the sense of "us" and strengthening the relationship.

The first step in restoring the sense of "us" is to reconceptualize your marriage as "the team." Changing your mindset from managing things independently to embracing a shared approach of "being in this together" can signal a significant shift in your approach. This shift in thinking can help you to take more of your partner's feelings, thoughts, and interests into account and assists you in feeling connected. As you and your partner grew up in different family cultures with varying beliefs about what is "normal" or "right," it is crucial to have conversations about events, traditions, perceptions, and expectations to establish a shared understanding.

Conflicts or miscommunications often occur because partners assign different meanings to the same event. They may not be aware of their differing interpretations. The more each partner, armed with their unique take on the event, unilaterally problem-solves and makes decisions, the more detached and separated the partners can become. Ignoring a spouse's needs, desires, or probable responses can foster alienation and resentment. This scenario is often a symptom of losing the sense of "us." When one partner is not oriented to think of the partner, they may find the other partner's hurt feelings baffling in connection to their decision. Team

members consider the team's needs. In marriage, however, with the sheer multitude of decisions necessary, it may be very appropriate to make decisions and solve problems without undue consultation with them.

Regaining positive regard for your spouse can help tremendously in accomplishing this restoration. Perceptual distortions can occur when you have been together for a long time. Initially, perceptual distortion is slanted in a positive direction, where negative characteristics or features are ignored or not noticed. Those characteristics may have even been attractive in the beginning. However, over time, they become slanted in a negative direction. In challenging your perceptions, it is essential to remember that nobody is perfect, and accepting your partner's not-so-attractive characteristics and appreciating their positive traits can help restore positive regard.

"Keeping an eye on the prize" can help. Thinking about your short and long-term goals as a family helps to build or restore a sense of "us." Remember when you were first together and talked hour after hour about everything you wanted to do together in the future? If you are having similar conversations about your anticipated future together, you are rebuilding that sense of "us." Do you still have the same goals, dreams, plans, ambitions, and fantasies about the future? Start talking about these things together again. Talk about retirement and what you envision for that. If you are already retired, talk about things you would like to do now, soon, and in your twilight years.

Having a history, as well as a future, builds a sense of "us." Just as you have an individual past, your relationship has a past and lots of positive memories of shared events. Even if you have been conflicted over the years, there are positive events and memories in your life together. Sometimes couples must work through old hurts and anger to change old communication patterns before each partner can remember or perceive positive things about the relationship. Despite the pain and damage, the positives are still there. It is essential to consciously work on your perception and stop looking at each other through "mad-colored glasses."

In conclusion, restoring the sense of "us" in a marriage takes effort and conscious decision-making. Adopting an attitude of "being in this together" can help couples return to considering each other's feelings, thoughts, and interests, leading to a sense of connection. It's important to remember that each partner comes from a different family culture that still impacts how you see the world. Sometimes your perceptions of things need some fine-tuning to reclaim shared meaning.

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