

SIX STEPS TO REVITALIZE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

By Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW

Every Valentine's Day boosts the sales of Hallmark Cards. Red hearts, displayed in stores triggers images of romance and love. However, if you've been with a person for a considerable length of time, you may be less inclined to give romance a serious thought. After all, he or she will know how you really feel about the relationship.

It's easy to fall into a pattern of taking partners for granted. This may not occur in the early stages of a relationship when an infatuated couple showers each other with love and affection. Falling in love creates an intimate bond where individuals feel loved, wanted, appreciated, and comforted in times of need. Maintaining and revitalizing that bond over time provides a real challenge.

Whether a relationship becomes a brief interlude or turns into a life-long partnership, a couple has to overcome that natural tendency toward complacency. As a garden needs regular tending, so does a partnership need ongoing nurturing. If you take away the sunshine and neglect to prune, water, and supplement, a magnificent garden will soon be overgrown with weeds. Therefore, if you want to insure that your relationship continues to blossom, consider these revitalizing steps.

1. **STRENGTHEN COMMITMENT.** Karen Blitzen who wrote "Out of Africa" said that the most important aspect of a relationship is a common vision. If the common vision or commitment fades, the relationship becomes strained as two people pull in opposite directions. Spending long hours away from home will increase a sense of detachment. However, a couple can revitalize the partnership by making their relationship a priority. A commitment to spend time together and consciously enhance and strengthen the relationship will re-forge that powerful bond.
2. **UPDATE COMMUNICATION SKILLS.** Couples need to continually update and improve their communication, which is always a work in progress. Some need to improve their listening skills while others need to convey their wants and desires more effectively. If you expect your partner to read your mind, your needs will often go unsatisfied. Take responsibility for identifying your needs and express them clearly. Couples who communicate well feel more loved. Update your skills by attending a couple's enrichment course or reading about relationships. Popular books include: *Getting the Love You Want*, by Harville Hendrix; *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by Dr. John Gottman; *The Relationship Rescue Workbook*, by Phillip McGraw; or *The Complete Idiot's Guide to The Perfect Marriage* by Hilary Rich and Helaina Kravitz, M.D.

3. **PRAISE MORE OFTEN.** Positive strokes reinforce a loving bond. Research on couples highlights one of the main determinants in couple satisfaction or dissatisfaction, namely, the ratio of positives to negatives. To have a positive, growing relationship, the ratio should be five positives to one negative. A positive climate reinforced with affirming acts and statements insures that a zone of safety, love, and security is maintained. In such an environment, conflict does not become overly threatening and can be more easily resolved. Share appreciative comments daily. Acknowledge the importance of the relationship on a regular basis. Every positive stroke adds to your bank of relational good will.
4. **IMPROVE PROBLEM SOLVING.** Problems, when rectified, can provide an opportunity to overcome adversity and strengthen a relationship. Mutually agree on a process of resolving difficulties before they arise. Arrange time when you can both be attentive and the TV is turned off. Avoid the litany of past grievances. Remain focused on one issue at a time. A simple process to tackle disagreements has one person express his or her issue without interruption. When finished, the other person refrains from defending or attacking, asks questions to clarify the problem, and then summarizes or rephrases what was said. The process is then reversed so that each person has a turn. Problems have a better chance of being resolved when partners feel heard.
5. **INCREASE FUN AND PLEASURE.** It doesn't take any skill to have fun. It just requires an openness to be spontaneous and playful. Make a list of fun activities that both you and your partner enjoy. Movies, plays, comedy clubs, bowling, walks in nature and surprise getaways are but a few examples. Sharing vigorous physical activities such as exercise or sports provides a great way to relieve stress together.
6. **BRING BACK THE ROMANCE.** You don't have to stop dating just because you're in a stable relationship. Some couples establish a date night, which they take turns organizing. Consider what might be romantic for your partner and surprise him or her. A romantic card with flowers at a special restaurant, love letters, getaway weekends, unexpected gifts, music, dancing, hot tubs, massage, candles and incense, hugging and holding hands all create an ambience which strengthens your relationship. Be responsive and attentive to the other and frequently fan the flames of romance.

If you are having difficulty revitalizing your relationship, consult with a professional trained in working with couples. A therapist can help you identify problems, make constructive suggestions, and assist in resolving difficulties.

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