

How many of us honor our couplehood? Having careers, children, sports, and extracurricular activities leaves little time or energy for each other. Many families today seem to be child-centered. Vacations are often geared towards children's interests such as Disney, Great Wolf Lodge, cruises with elaborate children's programs, and most recently The Plaza in NYC has a room decorated from the storybook Eloisa with dress-up clothes included. We spend a lot of time nurturing our children and families as a whole but how much time is spent nurturing our marriage?

The Office of National Statistics shows that most couples spend about 2-2.5 hours per day, including weekends, with each other. Of this time 50 minutes to 1 hour is spent watching TV, 30 minutes is spent eating, and 25 minutes for housework. This leaves a little more than 30 minutes per day to spend with our spouses. Can one nurture, connect, and take care of each other for 30 minutes per day?

When couples first meet they generally spend a great deal of time with each other talking, sharing activities and hobbies, and being intimate. Dr. Harville Hendrix, a marriage expert, calls this stage the Romantic stage of love. It comes very easily because for the first 1-2 years our brain produces Dopamine, a neurotransmitter that makes us feel euphoric. Scientists discovered that Dopamine floods our brain most intensely in the first 90 days. This explains why there is less need for sleep and we often find ourselves acting giddy and doing things we don't do in our normal everyday lives. Over time romance will naturally begin to fade. Although fading romance is a natural progression of all relationships, this is usually where conflict occurs.

This next stage is called the Conflict stage. This is where the Dopamine has worn off and we begin to see each other more realistically. Couples usually find that the qualities they first found attractive in their partners are the exact things that drive them crazy. Unfortunately, most couples

divorce during this stage of marriage. However, with counseling and nurturing your relationship, I believe many marriages could be saved. The last stage of marriage is Mature Love. This is where both parties learn to take care of each other's needs, remove negativity, and caring and loving behaviors dominate.

Although it can be tricky to navigate the Conflict stage independently it can be done with a little bit of professional guidance. Some tips that can help during these various stages are:

1. Learn the art of listening. Ask yourself "What is my spouse trying to say and how must he/she feel?"
2. Schedule time to nurture your relationship. Have a date night at least once a month to remember what you like about each other.
3. Talk about what each of you hopes to have the relationship look like. Create a list of guidelines to follow. Ex. Date night, share housework, participate in hobbies, vacation frequently...
4. Focus on the positive! We can all list what our partner doesn't do but you can choose to focus on what he or she does do!
5. Behave like you want your partner to behave. If you want more compliments and romance give him/her compliments and plan romantic outings.

6. Engage in fun, new activities to create those same endorphins or chemicals that were present more naturally at the beginning of your relationship.

Dr. Hendrix says it best when he said "Feelings are not the essence of love; attitude, decision, and loving behavior are."

If you have any questions or concerns or would like more information please feel free to contact me.

***Michelle Poppe, LCMHC***

Individual and Family Therapist