

RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

Part of a healthy lifestyle is relationship maintenance.

When something lights up on the dashboard of your car, or it makes a funny noise, you don't wait for AAA to be towing it away to talk to your mechanic. When your teeth hurt, you don't wait until you need a root canal to see your dentist. It's the same with relationships. Don't wait until you're in pain, or worse yet, in crisis.

Plants are rather like relationships. You can't put a plant in a pot, stick it in a corner and expect it to thrive. You have to water it, fertilize it, expose it to the right amount of sunlight. It's the same with relationships. They don't go on automatic pilot and thrive when neglected.

Relationship maintenance involves a few very basic things.

The most important question you can ask your beloved is: "Honey, how was your day?" And then...listen! If they're burned out on their work and don't want to discuss it that's fine. They can still tell you how they feel about their day, their work (or lack thereof), their life, whatever is on their mind. And ladies, I hear you thinking "but my guy can't talk about his feelings!" If you listen carefully, and quietly (as in, don't jump when he stops talking – wait, there's usually more he has to say). And listen between the lines. Your mate may not spell out how they feel but you can surmise by what they say and how they say it.

And when you're having this conversation, focus on your partner. Give them your undivided attention. Don't multi-task and cause them to feel ignored, unimportant, not heard. I know you've got kids, you need to get dinner ready, you sat in traffic, you're tired too... Make this a priority, even for just a few minutes. Hold your partner, look into their eyes, make them feel cared for. You can't afford not to. It will pay off.

Another key to relationship maintenance is spending time together, on a regular basis. Call it datenight if you like. Call it 'John & Mary night/day', 'Dan & Tom' night (if it's two guys)... You get my drift – personalize it, have a codeword. But take the time, uninterrupted, to focus on each other. Do something fun, and be with what is. Don't put pressure on yourselves, as in: "Ok, this is our time, it has be to spectacular, cheerful, happy, involved romance, multiple orgasms, good weather..." Be compassionate with yourselves. Be present and kind with each other. Whether it's naked Scrabble in front of the fire, a hike, dinner, visiting a museum, reading to each other, partner yoga, a salsa class... BE together.

I have a couple in my practice who have been together over thirty years, and for the past eight years, once a month they come to see me and discuss their relationship. This is part of their relationship maintenance. Some of the stuff they talk about in between sessions, some they wait until they're in my office, in a designated space and context, because it's easier that way. It can be less risky to discuss relationship issues with the relationship therapist present. They don't wait to be in crisis, or fighting, or stuck. Consequently they don't get into fights, nor do they get stuck.

A session with a relationship therapist every four to six weeks can keep you out of the divorce attorney's office, is much cheaper, and let's face it, will make you happier, and your relationship healthier. It's the equivalent of the fertilizer for your plant, the oil change for your car. It'll feed your intimacy and connection, and increase the emotional closeness in your relationship. It's not an indication that anything is wrong or broken, that anybody is flawed or a poor communicator. It's preventative maintenance, like the 50,000 mile tune-up. It just means you're smart!

A healthy lifestyle includes balance, in all things. Relationship is like tree pose, involving constant micro-adjustments to maintain equilibrium. Even if you're not into yoga, balance in your relationship takes focus...and maintenance.

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