

REKINDLING YOUR ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP
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“I’m just not in love with you anymore,” Sheila (not their real names) told Rob in my office. “And I don’t know if I can ever get those feelings back,” she added, as the reason for why she was considering separation and potentially divorce. As I listened carefully, I thought about how often I had heard this statement over the years in my marriage and family counseling office. They were struggling with feelings that faced every couple at different times, especially those in long term relationships. What seems to separate out happily married couples from unhappily married couples is that the happy ones don’t let an unhealthy pattern go on indefinitely and take steps to get their marriage back on track. So now let me turn to the multitude of reasons for why the romance fades in a couple relationship.

Demands of parenting

When couples become parents, they are thrust into the nonromantic role of providing for all the needs of their offspring. Babies and young children are very demanding of their parents’ time, and usually the mother in particular. Often I hear that after the children are put to bed, the parents fall into bed exhausted themselves. Many fall asleep while reading their children bedtime stories! When children become school age, parents often enroll them in many activities. I have heard of girls with dance practice 4 days a week and siblings with baseball practice and games 3 times a week. If there is more than one child in the family, parents can spend their whole evening carpooling children to different activities. How tiring! Additionally, it robs the family of time together.

The effect of work on relationship

When both spouses have careers, there seems to never be enough time for taking care of the children, taking care of the house, doing yard work, paying bills, and visiting relatives. The couple relationship is often put at the end of a long “to do” list if it even makes the list at all! After marriage, the man often feels responsible for the financial health of the family so he puts most of his energy into his work and doesn’t realize it takes effort to keep the marriage going. I tell men that their marriage is like a car; it runs better with regular maintenance. For families with one parent staying home, the job of taking care of small children all day with not much adult contact and then remaining “on call” 24 hours a day can be very draining.

Chores out of balance

Chores are often an area of couple conflict in my office. Usually one spouse (traditionally the woman) is overfunctioning (doing more than her perceived fair share) and the other (traditionally the man) is underfunctioning. There are many reasons for this. When women tell their spouse exactly how to load the dishes, clean the bathroom, have high cleanliness standards, etc., the men decide to be

passive aggressive and not do it at all! Additionally the woman usually sees that something needs doing first and does it. Women are raised to pay more attention to the house and this worked well with traditional marriage roles of the man being the breadwinner and the woman staying home. However, most couples today expect more equality in caring for the home, yard, and kids. Men who were raised with traditional mothers may not have learned what it takes to keep a house and can be clueless as to what needs doing. When someone, usually the woman, is angry and resentful that she is doing more than she perceives is her fair share of the chores, she is often unwilling to be loving and affectionate toward her spouse.

Dating your partner decreases

When couples are dating prior to marriage or living together, they usually get together two or more nights a week. They often go out to eat, to movies, or on walks in the park. Contrast this with the reports in my office of going out with their spouse alone or with other couples about 6 to 10 times a year. So couples have decreased dates and enjoyable time together from 104 times a year to 6 to 10 times a year. The fun times together are what provide the shock absorbers for the bumps of daily living.

Less talking and more fighting

When couples are exhausted, chores are out of balance, enjoyable time is decreased and the family is over focused on the children, it is not surprising that couples' communication and conflict resolution skills go down. They spend less time talking and often talk late in the evening after the kids are in bed and some chores are done. No one communicates well under these circumstances. Then when partners don't feel understood, they tend to get angry, causing their partner to get defensive or they outright blame their partner. Suddenly they find themselves trying to solve adult problems while fighting like 8 year-old kids! I know that couples wouldn't get married to someone with whom they couldn't communicate. However, by the time couples come to my office, they seem to have forgotten all their communication skills. Many fight several times a week!

Less sex

Finally, when everything above happens, the sex life is almost always affected. Usually the woman no longer wants to have sex because she is angry about the lack of communication and the fighting, not to mention the chores. It is not unusual to hear from couples in my office that they make love 1 or fewer times a month. Contrast that with the usual report from dating couples of making love one to two times a week.

Why affairs happen

When the above context is set into place, the partners have become co-parents and roommates rather than romantic partners. Men start seeing other women as sexy and romantic. Women start fantasizing about the UPS delivery man. Often it is a slippery slope from talking to someone of the opposite sex about your

marriage problems to finding yourself involved in an emotional (nonsexual) affair or physical affair.

There are many things that can be done to help couples make their relationship enjoyable and romantic again. You can already see some things that you can begin to change now. Next month in part 2 of Rekindling Your Romantic Relationship, I will cover lots of ideas that have helped other couples make their relationship enjoyable. Through the years, I have seen many couples rekindle their romance and chose to stay together while some have chosen divorce. While I usually prefer to save marriages, it is always the choice of the partners to make decisions about their relationship and that is clearly stated in my ethical code as a marriage and family therapist. But I am a romantic and love it when couples are happy together. So look for part 2 next month to see how you can make your relationship more satisfying!

Part TWO

Steps to rekindle your romance

“I’m just not in love with you anymore,” Sheila (not their real names) told Rob in my office. “And I don’t know if I can ever get those feelings back, ” she added, as the reason for why she was considering separation and potentially divorce. I had heard this statement many times over the years in my marriage and family counseling office. Last month in Part One, I covered the reasons for why the romance fades in a couple relationship. This month, you will learn concrete suggestions for rekindling your romantic relationship.

The right mind set

When couples come into my office, they seem to hope I have a magic wand that can “poof” their feelings back to the way they used to be. Instead I tell them that they need to start acting the way towards their spouse that they used to when they were feeling in love. Then the feelings will usually follow. This requires a leap of faith but it is much quicker than any other method.

Marriage as a priority

Making the marriage a top priority is important because when the marriage is strong, the parents are happier and argue less. Child focused marriages can become weak relationships because the parents devote most of their energy to the children or the mother focuses on the children and the father concentrates on work. Without strong marriages, many end in divorce, which robs the children of much of the security and advantages parents had hoped to give them.

Date night

The first thing I suggest to most couples with romance and communication problems is to have a regular date night. Building fun into the relationship acts like shock absorbers on a car and helps to get couples through the bumps of life.

For couples without children, I suggest they go out on a weekly date. Couples with young children can commit to go out at least every other week on a date by themselves or with other friends for at least two hours. One partner plans the date one week and the other partner chooses the next date. They should pick activities that both will likely enjoy and they can be as inexpensive as a walk in the park. Many couples find they need to have a pool of several babysitters in order to make this work. If couples have a hard time thinking of things to do, they can reflect on what they used to do on dates prior to being married. On the week they don't go out, they can put the children to bed and create a special evening at home talking, dancing, watching a video, playing a game, or making love.

Remembering your love

Remembering what caused you to fall in love is important. After a couple of years of marriage, it is easy for partners to quickly think of all the things that annoy them about the other. Contrast that with the positive focus of finding every delightful thing about your partner when dating. Your partner hasn't likely changed. Simply the focus has changed along with the closer context of living together and having more to negotiate with each other. Couples can look for one thing each day that they enjoy and appreciate about their partner and then communicate it to him or her.

Kid bedtime

In many households, the children go to bed at the same time as adults. I believe children should be in bed 1 to 1½ hours before the parents to give parents time off from the parenting role. Young teenagers can stay in their rooms after a certain time at night and parents can simply go to their bedrooms if their older teens are up.

Cutting down on kid activities

With today's values of providing our children with every opportunity, we often spend our evenings driving children to activities. Cutting down on children's activities to no more than one evening per night per child makes sense to me. When parents try to do more, they end up being tired and drained with no energy to devote to their couple or family relationships.

Time to connect

Some ways partners can connect is by spending time together talking daily, going on a walk or even doing chores and running errands together. For couples with children, I suggest they spend at least 15 minutes daily of uninterrupted time checking in with each other and more time on days off work. Couples without children can devote 1 hour per day enjoying each other's company and more on weekends. Turning off the TV in the evenings can be a way to find time for the relationship.

Fair distribution of chores

When both partners feel good about the distribution of chores and the roles they are taking at home, they develop a sense of equality and shared contributions. Neither one needs to feel nagged or like the parent to not only the children but the spouse as well. Make up a list of everything that needs doing, how often it needs doing, and who will be responsible for it. The person who is over functioning (usually the woman) needs to leave the other alone about his chores. Don't nag! Also, don't have him do things that are most important to you that you will not be able to resist nagging about. An additional option is to consider hiring a maid, which can be well worth paying for in order to reduce conflict.

Improved conflict resolution skills

Couples who likely had good communication skills prior to living together often come into my office with very poor communication and conflict resolution skills. So did they forget everything they once knew? Who would marry someone with whom they couldn't communicate and work things out? Nonblaming communication is the key here along with only discussing one issue at a time. Seek to understand your spouse's point of view as a higher priority than getting your point across. Each person needs to think about the issue she is angry about and take responsibility for her part rather than blame her spouse. If these ideas alone aren't enough, I have lots of communication techniques that I teach to couples in my office. A typical argument goes like this: one spouse brings up something, the other feels blamed, the blamed one brings up an issue to blame the other, and the argument is on. Don't do this!

Romantic moves

Remember the romantic cards, love notes, flowers, calls during the day to check in, candlelight dinners, little presents, acts of service, and other things you used to do while dating? After marriage it is equally important to keep these elements in the relationship. Ask your spouse what things she considers romantic or loving and then do one a week!

Sexuality

When couples have worked on all the aforementioned areas, they get along better and feel more in the mood to be physically loving with their partner. Consider love making as a full body experience rather than concentrating just on the genitals. Pleasure for both should be the goal. Devote more time to make it a leisurely experience and find out what gives each other pleasure. Caress and stroke your beloved's face, hands, back, and thighs. Give each other a massage with oils or lotion. Introduce some new elements by varying the location, adding candles, feeding each other fresh fruit, wearing special clothes, bathing each other, playing special music, and turning off the phone. Consider hiring a babysitter who can care for your children in her home.

Try these ideas and see what great results you get! If you continue to have problems in any aspect of your relationship, contact me for some additional coaching. Making changes sooner rather than later works better because

partners are more open to trying something new and less resistant due to feeling hurt or angry for long periods of time. Making your relationship a priority increases both partners sense of well-being, serves as a great role model for your children, and gives the children a secure family life. Commit to improve your relationship today!

Karen K. Harrison, Ed.S. is licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist, Professional Counselor, and Reiki Master teacher and is also certified as a sex therapist. She has a passion for helping couples with communication, conflict resolution, affairs, and sexual issues. In addition to traditional counseling methods, she is able to incorporate hands off energy work into her sessions.

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