

How Do You Keep the Love Alive in Your Relationship?

There has never been a time in history when more is expected of marriage. Keeping a relationship loving, passionate and growing for a lifetime is a challenge that all couples face. The 'spark' grows dim, boredom or routine sets in, exhaustion from work and children leaving little time and energy available to keep the love fires burning.

Today, we expect marriage to be more than an economic arrangement that provides for the security for raising children. Most couples want marriage to be loving, romantic and a refuge from the stresses of daily life. These are a few of the most common threats to a marriage:

- Work Pressures – long hours, business travel, two income earners
- Child Care Pressures – the balance of home life and work life is complicated
- Aging Parents – requirements to take to appointments, care for their greater needs
- Money Problems, Health Problems, Alcohol and Drugs, Depression and Anxiety

The traditional marriage of 50 years ago, with the division of labour of household and childcare normally left to women and work outside the home and income provision to men, may not have been desirable in many ways, but it was probably less stressful.

The average age that couples are getting married in Canada now is 33 years of age. (30% live common law for several years first). With a life expectancy now being 81 years. That means a marriage, on average, can have a life expectancy of almost 50 years.

When a friend of mine informed a colleague of the end of her 22-year marriage she got this unexpected response: "Congratulations on lasting so long together! If this were the Middle Ages, you'd both probably be dead by now!" Kind of an odd response..... but it is absolutely true. Only a hundred years ago, when the average life expectancy was under 50 years of age, most marriages would not have been expected to last 25 years!

Today, we have higher expectations for love enduring throughout marriage. With many more stresses on modern marriage and a lifelong marriage now almost double the length it has ever lasted throughout history, is it any *wonder* so many couples struggle as their marriage 'matures'?

What most people value in life more than anything is the quality of the connections with the people they love. We know instinctively that the stronger our relationships, the happier our lives will be. Yet our culture often encourages us to compete with each other or to be self sufficient rather than connect and cooperate. Healthy dependence is the essence of romantic love. Our biology knows this. In a loving connection, the "cuddle" hormone, oxytocin, floods our bodies bringing a calming effect reinforcing to us the importance of love.

Most marriages do not end deliberately. They tend to die of neglect and inattention. Long hours at work, business travel, focus on the care and activities of the children, taking care of aging parents receive a higher priority than efforts to strengthen the marriage. Some assume that while busy with other things, a marriage can take care of itself.

Eight Ways to Keep Love Alive in Your Marriage

Sue Johnson, in her book Hold Me Tight, has the following suggestions for strengthening your marriage:

1. Know how to nurture the bonds of love. Create and sustain a connection that provides a dependable refuge from life stresses, a safe haven and web of intimacy. Remind yourself as often as you can that this is what gives your life meaning.
2. Learn to reach out to each other and create a secure relationship and become skilled at solving everyday problems in a cooperative, open and flexible way.
3. Know the danger points or raw spots within your relationship and avoid sliding back into negative patterns of blaming, criticizing or avoiding. Remember to detour around these spots and get back to a secure connection with your partner.
4. Remember to deliberately defuse arguments and create a sense of safety for each other so you can discuss hot or difficult issues.
5. Celebrate the positive moments big or small. Do this by reflecting on these moments in your daily lives and reinforce the positive impact each has had on the other. Talk about the turning points in your relationship when your love intensified.
6. To mark moments of time spent apart and reunions, ensure you have rituals such as kisses and hugs, conversations about what happened when away, arrange to have meals together or make time for emotional and physical intimacy upon return from a business trip.
7. Remind yourselves of examples of how you have got unstuck when in conflict, repaired rifts, reconnected and forgiven one another in the past.
8. Enjoy a great sex life by ensuring the emotional connection is secure. Physical intimacy reinforces emotional intimacy, openness, gentleness and love.
9. Create a story about the future of your relationship. What does your marriage look like five or ten years in the future? How would you like your partner's help in getting there?

The view of love, described above, fits with the beliefs of Trappist monk, social activist, poet and writer Thomas Merton: "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the

interdependence of all living beings, which are all part of one another, and all in one another.” When we seek cooperation, mutual dependence and a secure emotional connection in our most intimate relationships we are embracing this concept of nature and the purpose of love.