

Strategy: Regularly demonstrate to your partner that you understand and care for him/her (e.g., ask how he/she is doing, buy a small gift to show your care, take on an extra household chore to help out).

How often have you read or heard someone saying statements like, “It takes work to keep a relationship going,” or “Marriage is hard work”? People usually say these things in reference to marriage, but the same is true of all types of long-term romantic “couple relationships.”

Many factors affect the quality and longevity of couple relationships. One important factor is the degree to which we show our partners we care about and regard them highly. This is something most of us already know. We all like to be treated in a caring way. We’ve seen how our partners respond when we show that we care and we tend to like and feel closer to people – especially our partners – when they treat us well.

In fact, research “proves” what we already know in our hearts. For example, a study at the University of Buffalo revealed that people who feel their partner holds them in low regard are likely to respond more negatively to conflict and relationship stresses. On the other hand, people who feel their partner regards them highly tend to view any conflicts in a less negative way (Murray).

Showing we care is one way we demonstrate to our partners we hold them in high regard, which is something we tend to do well in the early “courtship” stages of a relationship. When we are smitten with love, we usually show it very often and in numerous ways, like buying flowers or other surprise gifts, sending romantic phone messages, texts, e-mails or letters; giving hugs and big smiles, or saying “I love you.”

However, few people keep up these frequent romantic exchanges for the long term. At some point, we become comfortable with our partner, romantic exchanges become less frequent, and the relationship becomes more “routine.” Real life – jobs, children, housework and other responsibilities – draws more and more of our time, attention and energy away from our relationship. This is normal, but there’s a danger of getting to the point where reduced expressions and demonstrations of love and caring can have a negative impact on the relationship. Thus, we have to work more consciously to show that we care.

It’s not just major declarations of love that matter. In fact, as the research of marriage therapist John Gottman shows, the small, subtle expressions of regard and caring, which Gottman refers to as “bids for attention” (or simply “bids”) are very important (Gottman, 2002). Bids for attention can be obvious and direct like, “I need a hug,” or, “I love you so much.” Or, they can also be subtle, such as “My back muscles are very tight,” or, “Can you help me with this crossword puzzle?”

In Gottman’s study, couples’ interactions were videotaped for a weekend and then analyzed. Couples who noticed and frequently responded to their partner’s “bids” for attention were more likely to be happily married six years later than couples who were not responsive to their partner. The responses weren’t always highly obvious. Sometimes they were as simple as a nod of the head, or, “Oh, really?” The point is that attending to and responding to your partner’s subtle bids for attention helps to keep the relationship alive and healthy.

The other crucial point from Gottman's study shows that the people who were not responding to, or even noticing their partner's bids, weren't aware that they were being unobservant and unresponsive. In fact, most of them rated themselves as happily married. Six years later, the less responsive couples were much more likely to be either divorced or unhappily married than their more attentive counterparts. The couples in this particular study were all married, and heterosexual, but Gottman believes the findings would also apply to couples in same-sex and/or common-law relationships.

There are many ways to demonstrate regard and caring for your partner – surprise gifts, hugs, a back rub, doing small favours and showing appreciation, even paying attention when your partner is talking to you. Another way to show you care is by making life a little easier for your partner, such as doing a household chore your partner would normally have to do. Anyone appreciates having their workload reduced, but there's another point to be made here. Inequality in the domestic load – housework, chores, child care duties – is a common stressor in relationships. In a 2007 survey, 62% of respondents said sharing household chores was a very important factor for a successful marriage, up from 47% when the survey was conducted in 1990 (Pew Research Centre). So, if duties are unequal in your house, and you feel you may not be doing enough of them, make an effort to do more of the workload. Not only will this protect your relationship by reducing one common source of relationship conflict, it's also another way of showing positive regard for your partner.

The bottom line is that it does take work to keep a relationship alive and flourishing. The good news is that some of the work can be fun. Showing caring and positive regard for loved ones usually makes us feel good, and, very often, it results in expressions of love and caring coming right back to us. It's a win-win situation!

References:

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