

KEEPING YOUR LOVE ALIVE

Falling in love is easy; staying in love takes emotional work. If you and your partner want to have a loving, fun, and intimate relationship, you need more than just good communication skills or quality time together. You need to be emotionally accessible, engaged, and responsive to each other. Loving couples have hurts, disappointments and conflicts but they also know how to tune into each other to restore their emotional connection.

During the past two decades, hundreds of studies on adult attachment have shown that emotional connection and responsiveness keep our love alive. The need for emotional connection, a felt sense of closeness with another person, is wired into the human brain. As children, we need to trust that someone important cares about us and responds to us emotionally, and while that need changes over time, it's never outgrown. Some people feel that this need for connection is a weakness, but in fact, it makes us stronger. It helps us recover quickly when we're vulnerable, encourages us to be more independent and successful, and is an ongoing source of joy and validation.

Part of your brain is constantly tracking this connection with your partner. Several key, unspoken questions are always being monitored at an unconscious level in every exchange, whether you're talking about small issues or large, from who's doing the chores to how much to budget for major expenses. These key questions are: Will you respond to me when I need you? Do you value and respect me? Do you enjoy being with me? If your emotional connection isn't secure, you can easily misinterpret and over-react to your partner's behavior. Normal, day to day frustrations can suddenly escalate because of underlying fears

about the deeper connection. If we feel secure about the answers to these critical relationship questions small problems don't trigger big reactions.

It is normal to feel disconnected at times. There are only three ways to respond when we feel vulnerable and disconnected. If we accept and allow ourselves to feel the need for emotional connection, we can express those feelings and needs directly in a way that helps our partner reassure us. In turn, we are able to tune in and offer reassurance to our partner. If we don't accept or feel anxious about the need for emotional connection, we can't directly express our needs and fears. We then either try to force our partner to respond, often with criticism and blaming, or we withdraw to protect ourselves. Under the negative reaction what we are really feeling is "Notice me. I need you." Or, "I won't let you hurt me. I won't let myself need you."

When partners can't easily repair hurts and disappointments, their anxiety about disconnection can trigger a flood of negative emotions that quickly escalate into self-reinforcing cycles. You experience your partner as the source of the disconnection, and he or she looks like the enemy. One of the most common cycles is the pursuer-distancer pattern. In this pattern, one person pursues for closeness and connection and in response the other partner feels pressured and withdraws. In response to this withdrawal, the other partner pursues more by nagging, attacking or criticizing while the other partner becomes more resentful, angry and shuts down further. Other common cycles are withdraw-withdraw where both partners stop sharing feelings to avoid further rejection and conflict, and attack-attack where both partners define the other as the problem to avoid the underlying hurt and vulnerability of feeling disconnected. Learning how to identify, de-escalate and recover from these inevitable

negative cycles is essential to keeping a safe, stable emotional connection.

If you track your emotional connection, take care of these deeper needs, and work to recover from negative cycles, you'll keep your love alive and growing stronger. These crucial tips can help you keep an eye on what really matters:

- Monitor the emotional connection in your relationship. Check in with yourself and your partner often to see if you both are feeling supported, respected and enjoyed.
- Identify the moments when your bond is strengthened or threatened, and share this with your partner.
- Identify your protective response style: Do you pursue by attacking, blaming or criticizing? Do you withdraw and become unresponsive, aloof, or analytical?
- When you are caught in a negative cycle your partner will appear either distant and uncaring or critical and angry. Remember that inside he or she is feeling distressed at disconnection and needs your reassurance.
- After a fight or argument, always repair the rift by reaching out and responding to your partner's needs for connection, validation and acceptance.

All relationships have conflicts, hurts and disappointments. Behaving and communicating perfectly at all times is not crucial or even possible; tracking the emotional connection is what's critical. Emotional accessibility, engagement, and responsiveness: these are the keys to keeping your love alive.

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