

RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

Jill V Denton LMFT

What do television and divorce have in common? They've both increased rapidly since the 1950s. Is there a correlation? Maybe. Did you know that the average American family has the television on for seven hours a day -- that's 49 hours a week, but the average American couple spends less than an hour a week talking one-on-one to each other? It doesn't take a psychotherapist to tell you that something's out of whack.

When did you and your partner last sit down together to talk about the things that are important to you, not just your plans for the weekend or what to get Jimmy for his birthday? I'm often amazed by the number of couples I see who don't seem to talk to each other outside of therapy sessions. It's not surprising that they end up needing marriage counseling; every relationship needs maintenance and a good degree of TLC.

When you buy a car it comes with a manual that tells you how often to change the oil, check the spark plugs, flush the radiator and so on. When you start a relationship no-one gives you a manual telling you how often to talk to each other, go out for a romantic dinner, or spend a weekend alone. There are many different books on how to create a good and lasting relationship but none of them can tell you how to make YOUR relationship the best it can be; only you can find that out. There are books of questions that you can use as springboards for getting to know each other better if you need something to get you talking.

Most of the couples I see have plenty to talk about; they lacked the time and energy to do it. They just didn't get around to the most important job in their relationship; communication. However well you know each other, unless you're mind readers, you don't know what's going on in the other person's head and they don't know what's in yours. Unless you tell each other.

One of the things I enjoyed most about the movie Fargo was seeing the policewoman and her husband in bed sharing the events of the day. Even though they lived very different lives, they shared the highlights of what had happened and what was important to them. But it was only the highlights. They must have taken time between major crimes to deepen their knowledge of each other so that they could survive on a comfortable debriefing before nodding off.

Personally, I recommend a three point maintenance plan for spouses:

- Every day find a few things that you are grateful for in your life together; things you especially love about your spouse, things that you enjoy about your home, your family, shared friends or hobbies, and share them with each other.
- Every week spend at least one hour talking about how you're doing as a couple. Start

by appreciating each other -- it's all too easy to take your mate for granted. What has he or she done this week which you've especially enjoyed? Then take it in turns to talk about things that have not worked so well for you. This is not a time for blaming - there is never a time for blaming. It is a time for each of you to speak about the things that are difficult for them and to have the other one listen carefully. When you've both got it off your chest you may be able to find some creative solutions. Even if you don't know that your partner has listened and heard what you had to say can make all the difference.

- Once a month take at least an evening, a whole day if you can manage it, to have fun together. Do whatever brings you both a lot of pleasure. Be silly, be romantic, be daring, be yourselves and have a ball!

Communication can be fun and exhilarating; it can also be hard work and demanding. Unfortunately it's not going to magically happen without effort on your part. Here are a few ideas that can make it easier:

- set aside a time in advance and put it on your calendar.
- turn off the TV or radio; look at your partner and give them your full attention.
- if something sounds weird ask for clarification; never judge, demean or belittle each other.
- remember that you're both doing the best you can.
- empathize with the speaker; let them know you understand their feelings.

Giving your relationship regular maintenance will certainly help, and sometimes there are bigger problems. If it gets tough, don't be afraid to get professional help, after all you take your car to a mechanic when it needs fixing. Your relationship is worth at least the same treatment!