

Keep the Spark Alive: Tips for Couples

Renee Haas, MA, MFT
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
Life Coach
www.reneehaas.com

Maintaining a healthy connection with your partner can be challenging in today's busy world. Here are a few tips and conversation starters to help keep your relationship alive, pleasurable and enriching.

- Create a relationship "wish list." Each partner writes down 10-15 things they consider to be part of an ideal relationship. Then the partners review each other's lists and develop one list that includes the major things they will strive to achieve together.
- Especially if you have children, be sure to schedule at least one adults-only "date night" per week. Switch off who gets to pick where to go and what to do. Use your imagination. Surprise each other. Have fun.
- Choose platinum over gold. The Golden Rule asks that you treat others as you would like to be treated. The Platinum Rule encourages you to treat others (including your partner) as they would like to be treated.
- If a disagreement is getting too heated, one of the partners can call a time out. That person then takes responsibility for re-raising the issue sometime within the next 24 hours, when the partners have calmed down and can communicate more productively.
- Have a quiz night. Ask your partner 5-10 questions about yourself, such as "Who do I consider to be my best friend and why?" or "What was my favorite vacation we've taken together?" Even in long-term relationships, there's always plenty you can learn about each other.
- Share with your partner what lessons about relationships you learned from your family-of-origin. Explore which lessons have been helpful and harmful. Tell your partner several relationship skills you learned from him or her.

In addition to planning activities to keep you connected, I think it's important that members of a couple retain their individuality. One of my favorite relationship-related quote is by Rainer Maria Rilke: "Once the realization is accepted that, even between the closest human beings, infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky."

In this viewpoint, couplehood is a process of adding to one's life. Instead, pop culture tends to view relationships through the lens of subtraction: Two become one. I prefer to view adult love relationships as a process of addition: Two become three – two individuals and a new entity, the couple.

When operating from the "two become one" worldview, some people get hurt when their partner doesn't know what they're experiencing, in virtually a telepathic way: "If he loved me, he would understand what I'm feeling without me having to explain it all the time." "When I walk in the door, she should be able to tell from the look on my face that something's wrong." With those kinds of expectations, partners often set themselves up for disappointment and resentment. A more nurturing, healthy view of relationship presents two people who are intimately connected and also distinct individuals, whole against the sky, as Rilke put it. They haven't lost themselves but have instead gained a true partner. What a gift.