

Getting Out of “Automatic Pilot”



Has your marriage moved to the background, getting your attention only when something is not right? If so, your marriage may be on “automatic pilot.” It happens. Other things - children, work, outside commitments, hobbies - can easily move to the front and center.



Many “auto-pilot” couples find themselves struggling when they do have time to be alone with each other. When they finish talking about the kids, home, work, friends, etc. they become aware of feeling “disconnected”.



Couples who enjoyed romantic dinners during their courtship may now be nervous about the thought of dining alone together. They are not sure what they would say after more than an hour.



To avoid letting your marriage slip into “automatic pilot,” cultivate your own marital rituals... shared experiences with your partner that are significant planned and repeated. These might range from daily interactions (like kissing when you leave and rejoin each other) to annual events for celebrating anniversaries. Regardless of the ritual, it should be planned and coordinated, so that each of you knows your part.



Significant rituals have positive emotional meaning for both partners. That emotional significance distinguishes the ritual from the routine. Routines are also repeated and coordinated, but they lack the emotional significance of a ritual. One couple’s routine may be another’s ritual. Rather than focusing on how the time is spent, focus on “how does it feel?” Does the ritual help you feel closer, better connected as a couple? Does it focus your attention back to the relationship?



Conversation Rituals

Personal talk can mean everything to the longevity and vibrancy of a marriage. Yet finding time for uninterrupted conversations, those that go beyond problem solving and household management issues, is a very real challenge. It is also exactly what each couple needs to continue feeling connected. Here are some guidelines to get this kind of talk into your marriage:

- Specify an exact time of day and a certain amount of time for “just the two of us.”
- Share in the initiation of making the time happen.
- Tie this time to a daily event in the household (i.e. before/after dinner; after the kids go to bed)
- Interruptions are not allowed except for emergencies (no phones, beepers, kids, etc.)

Special Time or Relating Rituals

These kinds of rituals take many forms. They may include special time together, special occasions (i.e. anniversaries) or even special sexual relating. It may even involve a special or intimate language between the two of you, that’s not shared with others. Having a particular way you greet or leave each other can put your signature on the marriage. Consider having a “date night” that takes you away to a favorite place or somehow breaks the routine of being at home every evening.

- Surprise each other
- Create special or “pet “ names for one another

TWOgether, Inc.

(847) 581-9444

www.TWOgether.org



- Find a favorite place where you go regularly
- Designating one evening weekly that is for “just the two of us”

Sense of Belonging Ritual

Surrounding yourselves with others, having a joint involvement or cause, helps create a sense of connection beyond the just the two of you. Shared outside involvements can allow each partner to give and receive a sense of support in their larger world. These rituals involve time with others in a social, neighborhood, religious or community event...

- Attending religious services
- Volunteering your time together for a greater cause
- Memberships in groups and organizations

During times of struggle and hardship, we draw upon our rituals to help hold things together. Having a wide range of rituals is like having emotional “money in the bank.” Rituals can help sustain the pleasure of being married and they can be a wonderful legacy to pass onto your children.

Dan Haycraft, M.D. and Meg Haycraft, L.C.S.W. of Wilmette are founders of TWOgether, Inc. a premier education and counseling resource for couples. To contact them, call 847-581-9444 or visit www.twogether.org.

