

Caring Days

One of the simplest techniques used in couples counseling is what is called “Caring Days”. The technique is simple but powerfully effective. What the therapist asks the problem couple to do is to generate a list of small positive things that they can do to show each other that they care. Though the task sounds simple enough, if not childish, when you examine it closely you will find it to be remarkably sophisticated. Let me explain.

When couples relationships begin to deteriorate they reach a critical point in time beyond which the bulk of the exchanges between them are increasingly negative. The couple begins to be in both conflict and avoidance of each other. The joy, fun, rapport, and affection gradually fades and is replaced by routine, distance, and a grim humourlessness. The couple begins to feel trapped, unhappy, and become functional parents or worker-ants fulfilling their roles. Conversations always seem to lead to arguments. Each partner becomes tetchy and defensive. This can be both confusing and demoralizing for a couple because, despite themselves, they seem unable to reverse the slide into negativity.

There are two approaches a couple can take to their problems. The first is to focus on trying to understand what is wrong with them and to try to eliminate all of the bad behaviours that seem to cause difficulty. This approach means listing mutual complaints and then trying to eliminate and understand them. This is the principle by which you believe that if you point out to your partner all the things that are wrong with them then this will help them to change and be a better person! Think again.

The problem with this approach is that couples are actually very good at this. When relationships begin to deteriorate couples develop a highly attuned ability to identify their partners faults and failings. This attention to the negative is actually part of the problem. Over many years couples become like finely tuned machines in their ability to identify the faults, failings, inadequacies, immaturities, and incompetencies of their partner. If I ask a problem couple to list these things they can fill pages on a flip-chart!

The problem with this approach is that it tends to generate even more negativity. In the attempt to identify problems people inadvertently amplify them by focusing on them. For example, if I were to ask you to list, in fine detail, all of the medical and physical symptoms you have had recently, you would, by the end of the exercise, feel worse!

The other approach, however, is instead of trying to identify negative behaviours and to reduce them to focus on positive behaviours and increase them. Instead of trying to reduce the negative things, try to increase the positive things. To the casual observer this sounds simplistic but it is, in fact, extremely difficult to do. Couples who have problems become so adept at focusing on the negative that they find it almost impossible to not only identify positive things but to even imagine them.

If a couple were to try the caring days exercise they would follow the following instructions: “Make a list of 5 small, easy-to-do, identifiable things that your partner could do that would make you feel loved and cared for. Give them to your partner.

Now just do them!” The items must be small and not grand or grandiose gestures. They must be little things that are easy-to-do. If they are not easy-to-do they will probably not be done.

When I do this with couples it is amazing how many people have difficulty with this. When I ask a wife who is able to unleash a torrent of accusations against her husband what small, easy-to-do, simple things could he do to change and to show her that he cares, she will typically draw a blank and come up with many excuses why she can't or won't. It's human nature. We are all great at complaining but poor at offering small positive solutions.

The thing about love, as you know, is that it is conveyed in the small, simple, uncomplicated intimacies of everyday life. Love cannot be postponed until some phony Valentine's Day gift. No, it is the cup of coffee late at night; the unexpected 'thank you'; the kiss on the neck at the kitchen sink; the wrapped sandwich for lunch; the getting the kids off to bed when she's tired; the unexpected glass of wine during the news; the kitchen clean and tidy; the cuddle just before sleep; the warm hand reached out in the midst of a crowd.

When couples get into trouble they not only stop doing these things, they forget how to do them. In addition, they begin to deny that they need them or can provide them. They build roadblocks by claiming that if the marriage is to improve then big changes are going to be needed. The thing about love, however, is that to pave a new road to the future is has to be paved with the small bricks of affection and care. Relationships recover and improve by gradually re-building in this way.. Not by major personality transplants.

So find out tonight what are 5 small, easy-to-do, things that you could do for your partner that would make him feel more loved? Moreover, let him know the small little things that he could do for you. Maybe that's what you need to start doing. Maybe that's how you need to start talking.

By giving these simple gifts to your beloved you begin to feel better about yourself because you gain the benefit of not only pleasing your partner but also enhancing your own well-being.