

Our Relationship... **Making It Stronger**

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“Falling in love is grand; staying in love is hard work.” — Frank Cox, *Human Intimacy*. 1990

This NebGuide is one in a series of six addressing the personal and working relationships between family members.

Setting Realistic Expectations

Try to explain your expectations in plain language. This communication will strengthen your relationship. When we fall in love, we think it's the surest thing. Today, most individuals want respect, commitment, passion, friendship, companionship, sexual gratification and probably more from their marriage partner. It is not wrong to expect these things from your partner, but it is important to discuss your needs and wants openly with your mate. What happens, too often, is that individuals think their partner “should just know what I need.” Having realistic expectations will enable partners to meet each other's needs and wants and encourage personal and relationship growth. Your mate wants to know how to meet your needs and so expectations must be spoken. It doesn't do any good to keep your expectations a secret. Share what you are wanting and try to be realistic.

Nurturing Your Relationship

In order for your relationship to grow, you must be willing to nurture it. Usually this is done by spending enjoyable time together and communicating with each other. Each couple must determine the appropriate amount of connectedness and separateness best for them. What happens all too often is that one partner needs more (or less) connectedness than the other partner. You will want to consider your partner's needs and wishes while not neglecting yourself. Therefore, to have a reciprocal relationship, it is important to:

- talk together
- listen to each other
- resolve conflict (compromise)
- forgive each other
- respect each other
- have fun together

- be committed to each other
- love and be loved

Committing to the Relationship

Commitment is the glue that holds the relationship together both in good and difficult times. Commitment is essential to help a couple share joys together as well as weather tough times. However, commitment alone is not enough to create an atmosphere of love, respect, intimacy and happiness. A strong relationship is built with many components.

Minimizing Conflict

Partners should consider each other as equals. Intimacy is best attained in an atmosphere without much conflict because feuding and unresolved conflict often causes hurt feelings. Even couples who love and respect each other will fight or have disagreements, but they tend to use “fair fighting” techniques. Fighting fairly means you will tackle the problem but not your partner. You will avoid holding grudges or using the silent treatment. Learn to say, “I'm sorry!” and “I care about your feelings. Please share them with me.” You must take the responsibility to share your feelings and say to your partner, “I would like to talk with you and tell you how I feel.” Being thoughtful and considerate of each other will minimize conflict or unspoken animosity. In a relationship based on mutual trust, there are no signs of abuse.

Fostering Intimacy and Friendship

Perhaps friendship between partners is the major determinant of whether a relationship will endure. Several leading researchers say that connectedness and friendship between a couple is more important than knowing how to communicate, fight fairly or resolve conflict. If you are not friends, your relationship likely will face some hardships. The purpose of staying together should not be only for the children's sake. Living in a home where parents experience and show friendship, love and respect is a healthy environment for the couple and their children.

Sharing Intimacy, Romance and Sexual Relations

Intimacy often will include sexual relations and a healthy couple relationship will be intimately active. Be willing to touch each other and be romantic. Know what your partner likes. Do little things for each other that demonstrate your love. For instance, you may consider writing love notes, sending a card or letter, giving a back rub or body massage, saying “I love you” more often, sharing a bath or shower together, packing a picnic just for the two of you (it could even be on the living room floor), taking a walk together, getting a babysitter for the evening while you go on a date, playing a game together, watching a movie together or holding hands while sitting close together. The list could go on and on. You simply need to be “romantically” creative and also responsive to your partner.

The actions and words considered to be romantic or intimate may vary from partner to partner and may vary according to your culture. Tell your partner what you want and ask what your partner wants. This does not mean you must do everything your partner requests. However, you will have a better idea of each other’s sexual needs and desires when you are willing to talk openly with each other.

Actions to enhance romance in your relationship should be a part of your daily life, not only once-in-a-while occurrences. The way you demonstrate your love must be respectful of the other person’s wishes and should be something you want to do willingly, not grudgingly. Of course there will be times when you do something you would rather not do, but you do it for your partner because your partner desires it. However, this should be the exception, not the rule. Activities that are not mutually enjoyed become a chore to one partner and do not nurture the relationship.

List the Things You Enjoy Doing Together

Activities you do together need not cost huge amounts of money. In fact, some of your most fun times may not involve a monetary cost. You can decide this according to your economic means. There will be times you want to do something that takes money such as a weekend away, going to a game or eating dinner out, but these special occasions can be planned. They also can be planned on a budget. Try to avoid using money as an excuse for not spending time together. It can be a trap to say there is no extra money for entertainment or to go on a vacation when indeed there are hundreds of ways to have fun with your partner without spending much money. Start thinking of ways to have fun with your partner without spending much money. For example:

- Take walks.
- Pitch a tent at the lake.
- Make a bed on the living room floor when the children are gone overnight.
- Have a party with some favorite foods and drinks after the children are in bed.
- Have a special block of time to talk or dance.
- Hug in the kitchen.

- When away from home, talk to each other on the phone when convenient.
- Leave love notes.
- Tell each other you are loved.
- Encourage one another.
- Express intimacy.

You simply need to make time and be creative. Even when you are away from each other you can show love and connection. Today, many couples communicate through technology by using telephone calls, voice messages, text messages and e-mail. Although these techniques help with communication, care must be taken not to overuse this approach. Work loads and daily responsibilities may be demanding but neglecting your partner is not an effective way to manage time. Start thinking about:

“How will I prioritize my schedule to have (more) time with my partner?”

If your relationship is given the necessary time and attention, your quality of life and level of happiness will likely increase. Being in a mutually respectful partner relationship with an element of romance, passion and intimacy will allow both partners to achieve a sense of balance and increase levels of self-esteem.

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Issued January 2008

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