



HOW TO NURTURE YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION: UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION (part 1)

By Mark Beaird, LPC

People often feel a connection with others for a variety of reasons. This connection can be based on shared experiences whether positive or negative. Our first bonds are with our family of origin—mom, dad, siblings—and extend to other close relatives. Soldiers who have been in combat together have one type of bond. People who grew up together or went to school together or played on the same sports team have other types of bonds they share. For some, these bonds are easier to understand and perpetuate than that of the bond shared between two people in a marriage. Maybe it is because the intensity of the emotional relationship in the early stages, when romance is new and intense, does not remain the same over time.

Initially, in a romantic relationship, some people almost fall over themselves in an attempt to show their love and feelings for the other. They are preoccupied with the other person. They can tell another all about them. Every like or dislike of the other person is mentally catalogued. They are bent on expressing their affection and devotion to the person and enjoy the same in return. It comes so natural. It feels effortless. Then, with the passing of time, something happens. They begin to notice the intensity of the feelings are diminished—not gone—just not the same. They become accustomed to one another. Before long, they are taking the other for granted in little ways and not as concerned as before about pleasing the other. It is at this point some mistakenly think they have “fallen out of love” or the other person has changed, or their love is dying. In reality, it is more likely that their emotional connection is fading.

Couples need shared experiences, shared dreams, and more, but the foundation for the relationship is an emotional connection or bond. *Fundamentally, an emotional connection is a union between two people based on feelings of love each share for and with the other as they experience the good and the bad things of life together.* If we lose that connection, we lose the emotional support and feelings of acceptance that the most intimate of all relationships have to offer. We cease to think in terms of “we” or “us” and think only in terms of “me” and “mine.” This in itself will begin to cause a fracture in the relationship bond.

To prevent this fracture or the breaking of this important bond consider the following suggestions for building, maintaining, and nurturing your emotional connection with the one you love:

- **Set no agenda other than to communicate love.** Expressions of goodwill or affection that are tied to one receiving something in return have the appearance of outright manipulation. Do what you will because of love. Learn to show love without expecting anything in return. This is love at its best. If the other person feels there are “strings” attached, that will ruin whatever you do. Nothing conveys love more than a pure motive. Rediscover the joy of simply loving the other person just because you have chosen to do so.

- **Be a friend.** Countless studies have been done over the years on various aspects of the marriage relationship, but one aspect of the relationship too often gets casually dismissed with a “yeah, yeah, yeah...” type response—the need to be your partner’s *best* friend. Sounds simple and most think they have that part handled, nevertheless many are wrong. Far too many fail horribly at being a friend to their spouse. Friends talk, hang out together, laugh together, have fun together, are supportive of one another, can’t wait to get together with the other, they share secrets, fears, hopes, dreams, plans and more with one another. Does that describe your relationship with your spouse? Does your spouse agree?

It is great to have friends other than one’s spouse; however, both need to feel the other spouse is their *best* friend. In some relationships, it is a one-sided relationship. One does all the giving. If that person truly needs a friend, they often have to look outside the relationship to others. This can be problematic if an emotional connection is formed with someone of the opposite sex. The relationship may not lead to infidelity, but neither is it healthy.

The best decision is to be a friend to your spouse or significant other and help them to know how to do the same. We can only have one *best* friend. Make sure your partner knows you have chosen them as yours.

- **Be an encourager.** A visible lack of interest in your spouse’s achievements, or attempts at achievement, wants, needs, feelings, can often lead to them feeling discouraged and looking for encouragement from other sources. There are few things as disheartening as feeling disregarded by one’s own spouse and never hearing those words that convey interest or faith in them or even that you find their pursuits interesting or valuable. It’s as if they are saying, “What you think, feel, want and need is not really important to me.” *This may not be the case, but if effort is not put forth to convey the opposite, silence and non-responsiveness will convince your spouse that it is reality.* Encouragement is easy. Applaud their efforts. Ask about their hopes and dreams and support their attempts to reach them. Show your approval for their determination! Always be ready to cheer them on to success!
- **Be trustworthy.** This not only applies to being truthful and faithful to one’s marriage vows. It also includes being dependable in the sense that each in the relationship should know what he or she can expect from the other in regard to help, caring, responsiveness, mood, and more. Living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. or Ms. Hyde can be unnerving and emotionally exhausting. Being trustworthy also includes being responsible with money, purchases, how one spends his or her time, how he or she parents, and any number of other issues. Both do not have to have the exact same opinion or approach, but there does have to be some kind of consistency and an accepted method of reaching the goal.
- **Be forgiving.** Offenses and hurt feelings are inevitable in any relationship, but if we want to nourish that relationship and the emotional connection that comes with it, we must be forgiving. Forgetting an offense against us is not possible, yet with true forgiveness, we can choose not to hold the offense against the other person. Consequently, for one to hold the hurt “over-the-head” of the other is to not truly forgive. If you bring up a past hurt in an argument, you probably have not forgiven the hurt or else you may be trying to embarrass them, or both. This shows a desire to have some type of power or control over the other person or in some way to punish them. I think we can all see how this would be counterproductive to nurturing and could become destructive to the relationship.

HOW TO NURTURE YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION: MAKING AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND YOUR PARTNER (Part 2)

By Mark Beard, LPC

Investing in your bond with the love of your life can take many forms. Remember, no two couples are exactly alike so don't try to duplicate another couples experience and communication. You, your partner, and your relationship are all unique. The more you understand their needs, and what validates them, the better your relationship will become. To help accomplish this, consider the following ingredients found in healthy relationships, and how you can make sure they are a part of your healthy relationship.

- **Notice and respond properly to non-verbal cues.** Invariably, one person in the relationship responds to the other, defensive of their actions, and with confusion about the anger of the other, "But you said!" They have fallen into to the trap of thinking people always say exactly what they mean and how they feel. "Am I supposed to be a mind-reader?" No. However, we do have to learn to read non-verbal cues. Teach yourself to notice the other person's behaviors as much as their words. These can be facial expressions, body posture, the type of eye contact, touch or lack of touch, appearance, tone of voice and more. Although one should be careful not to read too much into these cues, taken as a whole, we can often see how the other person feels or understand them better and consequently respond to them more appropriately. For example, with practice, you will begin to notice the difference between someone agreeing with you and just going along to avoid a disagreement.
- **Notice preferences.** Use this knowledge to make sure you do not put the other person in an uncomfortable position or ignore what they enjoy altogether. It's human nature to tend to think other people like what we do and want what we want. People in relationships often make this mistake or contribute to the other person thinking that way by indulging the other person's wishes. In reality, some things may be getting on their last nerve. For example, some love surprises—some do not. Some enjoy crowds and parties. Some do not. The one we love may like all of our friends, but then again, they may not want to be forced to associate with some. Whether it is planning a party, planning a vacation, or planning a remodel—take nothing for granted. Seek to know the preferences of the other and try in every way to honor them.
- **Dote on them in the way they prefer—not the way you prefer.** If your, "Love Language," the way you show love, is different from theirs, you will need to speak their language to them and not yours. (*Love languages: Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts, Quality Time, Physical Touch* - See Gary Chapman - www.5lovelanguages.com) Learn their language and do those things they will find most meaningful. For example, if their "Love language" is "words of affirmation" then it doesn't matter how "bottom line" or logical or

bluntly honest you are, learn to be sweet and kind with your words. Speak so as to not just convey the facts and the truth, but to build the other person up and encourage them. Sincere compliments are essential, as are words that express your love and admiration. Not much will need to be said if it is said correctly.

- **Take time and make time.** Not to be confused with the previous love language of quality time, when I say “take time and make time” I mean to convey the other person’s importance to you by the way you plan your calendar and schedule your time. Spending too much of the time both of you could be spending with one another, in some other way, can appear as you not being interested in the other person.

For example, let’s say the only possible opportunity you both have for time together is the weekend. This is how that could play out. Gentlemen, imagine you spend the majority of your weekends hunting or fishing with your buddies, regardless of what your wife has said about it being okay, how might she really feel? Ladies, imagine you have the same time restraints, but you spend all of your free time with your friends, or engaged in helping out at the ball park concession stand because of the kids? What if you are both spending time together all weekend, but it is because *you both* are at the ball field, the church, or doing some other good deed that focuses on something other than your relationship? No one will make your relationship a priority but you!

- **Do not just perform tasks—seek to meet the emotional needs of other.** “But I do all these things for you! How can you question my love for you?” This is usually a note of protest from someone in the relationship who wears themselves out “doing” for the other. Unfortunately, the tasks performed, although good, were not done to meet the needs of the others. We all have people who do things for us all the time, at work and socially, but we know it does not mean they do it because they love us. For example, someone holds the door for you going into a place of business. We know they are being courteous. It does not mean they love us.

The problem sometimes is that we are in a relationship with someone who does things for us, but it comes across more as them being courteous and not as them showing love. The cause, they may just be weary and weighed down by responsibility and do not have a lot of heart to put into it. It could be that the other person is so focused on the task(s) that they forget the other person. My point is that every need that needs to be met is an opportunity for us to convey our love and affection to someone. For example, I can take your car to be washed and filled with gas because it’s dirty and the tank is empty [task: something that has to be done] or do the same in such a way as to convey I wanted save you the trouble and make your week a little easier.

HOW TO NURTURE YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION (part 3)

By Mark Beaird, LPC

It is tragic and frustrating when poor communication hurts an otherwise good relationship. It happens more times than one might think. Common errors in thinking are made leading to couples feeling distant and communicating less or ineffectively. It is usually simple slipups such as, making assumptions about something the other person said, did, or thought—that were never clarified. When questions aren't asked and people begin to avoid talking things through in order to just "keep the peace," more mistakes take place causing the distant feeling to grow stronger. I don't know how many times I have listened to couples explain the details of their "major blowup" only to find it was essentially about nothing of substance.

Good communication skills could have saved them a great amount of heartache. If you are struggling in this area, take a moment and review some of these ideas for promoting good communication between you and the one you love.

- **Learn to listen and respond appropriately.** A good counselor has good "attending skills" which simply means they know how to "attend" or "be present" in a conversation with someone they are trying to help. Attending skills convey to the other person that they are being heard and that we are engaged in the conversation. Letting the person speaking know they are being listened to and cared about involves eye contact, the orientation of one's body, allowing the person to finish a thought before speaking, not doing things to distract the person speaking, appearing comfortable and more. Consider a few tips for having a good conversation with the person who needs you most.
 1. *Sit down and face them if possible.* Always look at the other person. Having someone focus their attention on us helps us to feel we are important to them. Also, eye contact is important for picking up on visual cues about the other's feelings and thoughts.
 2. *Understand and consider the need at hand.* (i.e.: comfort, encouragement, resolving conflict, need to vent, exchange information, problem solve, etc.) *Note:* If they have a complaint about your behavior or the way to communicate—listen. Simply defending yourself, telling them they are wrong, or explaining it away will kill the communication.
 3. *Be ready to offer comfort, encouragement, or support first, advice second.* A simple touch or hug or sympathetic response can convey you are supportive. *Note:* Again, if it is an issue they have with you, be ready and willing to take some positive action address their concerns. *Do not* tell them they, "should not feel that way."
 4. *Never argue or fight by texting or email.* When texting or emailing we can't see one another's facial expressions or hear the other's tone of voice. We do not experience the same type of nonverbal feedback we would in a face-to-face conversation.

Consequently, people are more impulsive in their responses by text or email and are more prone to making hurtful comments. Additionally, having comments in writing only makes it possible for the other person to review them over and over. This leads to them dwelling on words that may have been hurtful and sparks more conflict and arguments later.

5. *If you become upset or think the other person is being silly, avoid the temptation to react dramatically.* Waving one's arms, walking/pacing about, leaving the room while still talking, showing visible anger, disrespect, mocking, eye rolling, etc., are all ingredients for disaster.
6. *Do not try to solve their problem or issue quickly*—it can appear as if you think their upset is unnecessary or the problem is trivial. Sometimes people just need to talk it out. They know what they need to do; they are processing information out loud and the conversation just helps them sort it out.
7. *Ask follow up questions for clarification to help them get it all out or to show you are listening and care.* By not responding we can unintentionally send a message of unconcern or lack of interest in what the other person has to say. Sometimes just looking at them and nodding or showing a concerned facial expression can convey interest and concern. Continuing to watch TV or doing something else that obviously has one's mind engaged elsewhere should be avoided. Maybe you can do both, but the person speaking will still feel unimportant and that you are not interested.
8. *When they come to an end of their thoughts, ask what THEY plan to do.* If they state that they do not know, then and only then, offer suggestions and *let them choose*. A solution at that point may not even be necessary. They may only need to know that you are supportive of them.
9. *Remember what you post on social media should be loving and supportive.* Comments on social media about one's spouse or loved-one should always be positive and cast them in a good light or they should not be posted. No exceptions. Airing one's "dirty laundry" is never acceptable.

HOW TO NURTURE YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTIMACY (part 4)

By Mark Beard, LPC

In the context of a romantic, committed relationship, intimacy is best thought of in terms of those behaviors that promote closeness, tenderness, and expressions of affection. In a relationship such as this, intimacy is just as important as sex. In fact, the ability to foster intimacy in one's relationship will raise sex to a completely new level. Intimacy is what transforms sex from a primal urge to a loving, nurturing experience that increases the bond between two people. This is why I suggest that without healthy intimacy in a committed relationship great sex is not possible. With that in mind, let's talk about intimacy and sex. I will begin by suggesting the following to nurture intimacy in a relationship:

- **Show affection without it having to lead to sex.** The place to begin is with non-sexual intimacy. Most men hate the term. The, "non-sexual" part spoils it for many. Just the same, think about this for a moment. Imagine that almost every time the other person in the relationship held your hand, kissed you, snuggled up to you on the couch, etc., they wanted sex to follow. Although that would be a dream come true for most men, and some women, if it was the way day-after-day and year-after-year, even the men would get a little tired of it.

Just the same, ladies just because your man has difficulty with non-sexual intimacy does not mean he is uncaring. In all likelihood, it is just the opposite. It is usually a man's way of showing love. He may think that is the best way to show his love. It may be his way of showing he still desires you. However, no matter how important sex may be, *it is not the only way to show love*, it may not even be the best way. Men and women in a relationship need to offer the *other* gestures of closeness and affection—in other words—non-sexual intimacy.

For example, brief loving and gentle touches such as holding hands, gently caressing the other, running one's fingers through the other's hair, etc. Hugs and kisses are always good in the right setting. (*Some are embarrassed by public displays of affection because of what they were taught growing up*). Snuggle on the couch, take long walks together, buy gifts, and leave or send loving notes and more. Just do not always expect it to lead to sex. The fact is, if you will think back when you were dating, it was your knowing that your show of affection wasn't always going to lead to sex that got you so revved up in the first place. Anticipation is a spice all its own!

Now we can talk sex! (See, I was not going to leave that out.)

- **Make sex important.** Sex does not have to be an everyday occurrence, but it does have to be important. It is so important and so multifaceted there is no way I can cover everything that needs to be covered in this article, nevertheless let me note a few findings to put us in the land of reality.

According to survey results published in Newsweek magazine, "Married couples say they have sex an average of 68.5 times a year. That's slightly more than once a week." Additionally, it was found that, "15 to 20 percent of couples have sex no more than 10 times a year, which experts define as a sexless marriage." As far as desire goes, an USA Today article noted, "20 to 30 percent of men and 30 to 50 percent of women say they have little or no sex drive." Moreover, in Psychology Today, they noted, "25 percent of all Americans (a third of women and a fifth of men) suffer from a condition known as hypoactive sexual desire (HSD), which is defined as a persistent or recurring deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies or thoughts, or a lack of interest in sex or being sexual."

That said, we have our work cut out for us so let me just leave you with a few items for your consideration.

1. **Remember the goal of love-making in your relationship is to add to an emotional connection.** Let this be your standard. Discard anything that is not good or acceptable for both. You are looking to promote closeness and tenderness. What the other person feels promotes that is important.
2. **The words you speak and the way you behave all week are more powerful than any romantic idea you may have.** To paraphrase the words of the old Saturday Night Live characters, Hans and Franz, "Hear me now, think about it later, but believe me always." If you have spoken to your mate all week, or even that day, in a way that is sarcastic, critical condescending, hateful, cold or unsympathetic or if you have not helped lighten their load, not shared their concerns, not encouraged them or been complementary of them, it is unlikely good romance/sex is in your future.
3. **Do not get your frame of reference for what is normal, possible, or right for you from the wrong sources.** Some of the worst sources to help you set your expectations are the following: (1) romantic comedy movies, (2) porn, television, (3) erotica/romance novels, or (4) what others think. All of these sources usually promote unrealistic expectations. *Talk to one another* about each of you needs and desires and how to most effectively them.
4. **Educate yourself.** No matter how experienced you may feel you are, try laying aside all you think you know and study the subject of making love to your spouse as if you knew nothing at all. Google "how to make love to your spouse" and begin reading or go to Amazon.com and search for books on the subject. *Warning:* Not all results will be acceptable. Use discretion and read many different sources.
5. **Do not define how the other person must respond.** We all carry baggage and preconceived ideas as well as self-doubts and can feel self-conscious about certain areas of sexual expression. The last thing we need is for someone to force us into a practice with which we are not comfortable. However, it is good to talk openly about likes and dislikes. Let the other person know what response you find most helpful or enjoyable and allow them the freedom to find a way to respond in which they are comfortable. *Never try to force* the other person to go beyond their comfort zone.
6. **Healthy sexual practices should not result in anyone feeling devalued or degraded.** If nurturing the emotional connection through romance is the goal then it makes sense that a request that causes the other person to feel degraded would be counterproductive. A discussion of what is exciting and adventurous and what is over-the-line should take place between you both.

Having a true emotional connection with the one you love will often be the key to making it through the rough times in life and in marriage. Take the time to cultivate and nourish this aspect of your relationship and you will usually find it makes every other aspect of the relationship better.

Good sources for information:

www.Webmd.com

www.Menshealth.com

www.womenshealthmag.com

www.gottmanblog.com

www.focusonthefamily.org

www.psychcentral.com

www.livestrong.org

www.5lovelanguages.com

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