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Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. She is the author of a book for couples, "Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship." Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com.

Lately, more couples have been coming in for therapy reporting feeling emotionally distant from each other. They are hard-working, in an outside job or in the home, and are devoted to their children's well-being. They have all the ingredients for a strong relationship and family unit. So what's missing?

One couple, Dave and Molly, are in their early 40s with two sons, ages seven and nine. Dave works in finance outside the home, and Molly has a home-based business. Both participate actively in their sons' lives, helping with homework, extracurricular activities, and spending many weekends together as a family. Both Molly and Dave lead healthy, active lifestyles and regularly swim and work out at their gym.

The one commodity that is missing is personal attention for each other. They operate like a well-oiled machine in handling the mechanics of their lives, but they rarely spend time as a couple. They seldom touch or talk in a free-form way with each other. Their conversations are business-oriented,

revolving around home maintenance, child matters, plans and schedules, and even the dog and cat.

It is definitely hard to make everything work well in a family and in a relationship. There always seems to be something that needs adjusting to get back to a good balance. But more and more, I see couples inadvertently sacrificing their relationships by putting many other considerations first.

Here are a few recommendations for strengthening your relationship:

Children don't always need to come first. As a matter of fact, they thrive when their parents are a strong unit and the focus of attention is not always on them. As we know, it is not healthy for a child to grow up expecting to be the center of attention at home since no one else will ever be willing or able to duplicate this for him in life.

Arrange for a regular babysitter, at least once a month but weekly or biweekly if possible. Line up a reliable person in advance. Just as people attend more plays or sports games with season tickets than if they have to make the effort of purchasing tickets for each event, scheduling a regular babysitter makes it a smoother process to go out as a couple.

It doesn't matter whether or not there is a compelling movie to see or new restaurant to try. The activity is secondary to spending relaxed time together. Just going on a walk or out for coffee or a glass of wine can be an opportunity to bond as a couple.

Once you are away from the children and house, concentrate on having fun together. Try to think of yourselves as individuals out on a date instead of responsible homeowners, or mommy and daddy.

Make an effort to show affection toward each other. If there is a lack of verbal and/or physical affection, it may be more difficult to have a healthy intimate relationship.

Share concerns about finances, the number one issue that can disrupt a marriage. Try to problem-solve together. Often a financial advisor can assist with forming a plan and help couples resolve differences in this area.

If you are experiencing depression, anxiety or other problems, see a therapist for individual sessions. One partner's issues naturally affect the other and can cause an emotional divide in the relationship.

Bruce came in with his wife for couples work. After several sessions it became obvious that while his wife, Kara, was happy with her life in general and only wanted to improve their marriage, Bruce was extremely unhappy. He felt burned-out at work, worried about providing financial security for his family, and guilty if he took time for himself. In addition, he knew he wasn't being responsive to his wife in many ways, but he didn't have much energy to put into the relationship.

The couple continued in couples counseling while Bruce also went for individual therapy. He was diagnosed with clinical depression and decided to go on medication. Six months later, the couple's relationship was much improved. They were able to stop coming in for therapy and to continue practicing necessary communication skills on their own.

Practice self-disclosure. Your relationship will benefit if your partner can understand you more completely. And you will experience comfort if you can share your worries and fears, your regrets and your wide range of feelings.

Practice accepting your partner's self-disclosures in an encouraging and supportive way. Obviously, no one will want to confide their personal feelings unless the listener provides an atmosphere of caring and acceptance.

Of course, there is much more involved in establishing a closer connection, but these pointers provide a good start. The simple act of giving each other more personal attention can go a long way in improving your relationship.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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