

THERAPY MATTERS: The Importance of “Date Night”

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

“We’ve grown apart.”

“All we do is fight, about the same stuff, over and over.”

“We just don’t have anything in common anymore.”

“We only talk about the kids.”

“I just feel so distant from him/her.”

Couples come into our office for a myriad of reasons, but often what we first hear is some version of the above. There are usually complaints about what isn’t working, and often each person is initially quite focused on criticizing their partner’s behavior and less interested in looking at their own. But there is often a sense of hope in coming to therapy, a hope perhaps the therapist can magically “fix” whatever is wrong and that a disillusioned couple can somehow regain the passion of the past.

When we work with couples in therapy, we use a three-pronged approach. First, considerable time and effort is focused on examining a couple’s real-life dynamics in an effort to improve communication skills and problem solving. Secondly, we search for the deeper patterns and issues and strive to understand what each partner learned from their family-of-origin and past relationships. Once this is understood more fully, it can highlight how the past impacts their current relationship. Often, we use the “suitcase metaphor” and explain that this is the “baggage” that each partner brings to the relationship. In the last area, we help couples look at how they nurture their relationship and how they care for one another.

Couples are often surprised when we shift to this focus. Yet as we explain to them, you need to work at romance. This is typically easy in the “wooing” or honeymoon stage of a relationship. It is not so easy when real life takes over and a couple has been together for many years. Yet just like a car that needs oil changes and scheduled maintenance, a relationship also needs regular attention and maintenance. “When is the last time you went on a date?” we will ask couples. Usually it was too long ago, and we will work to rectify this.

“Date night” is a commitment to a relationship. “Date night” needs to be scheduled. Often, couples tell us that initially it feels like a chore, one more task they must complete at the end of a busy week. But for most couples, this is a positive experience. They break their routine, they step away from the chores and the home and the TV and they do something different together. They create an enjoyable memory together, and this in turn can be a powerful antidote when the next argument ensues. We remind couples that “the couple that plays together stays together”.

This is even more critical when raising children. With children in the mix, it is easy for couples to slip into relating to each other as parents with the bulk of their interactions focused on the kids and family life. But this can be dangerous. We see many couples that come to us as their children are moving into young adulthood. These “empty nesters” realize with a shock that they don’t know who their partner is, that without the kids there is no connection. These couples do their kids a disservice as well. The couple is the building block of the family, and children learn about love relationships from watching their parents. Children take these lessons into their own adult relationships, in an unconscious way. It is healthy for kids to observe a sense of romance between their parents. It’s okay to hire a babysitter and tell them Mom and Dad need a night out.

Of course nurturing the couple relationship isn’t limited to the concept of “date night”. When we work with couples on these issues, we emphasize the concept of “caring actions”. Each person is asked to make a list first of all the things that their partner does for them that they appreciate or that makes them feel cared for. These lists are then exchanged. Next, they are asked to prepare a list of things that they WISH their partner did for them. It can be eye-opening to hear what your partner truly appreciates and notices, and the “wish list” becomes somewhat of a guide for how to show him or her that you care. We try to encourage couples to think of the little gestures that matter, such as a surprise note slipped into the briefcase or a piece of chocolate placed on the pillow. Even the most mundane actions can make a difference. We can recall people who were thrilled about their partner spontaneously doing the dishes, making the bed, or vacuuming out the car. The benefit of these “caring actions” can be profound. A famous study conducted on “caring days” concluded that the greatest benefit came actually to the giver, not the recipient. Turns out that people

who do nice things for the partners end up feeling better about and closer to their partner. This reminds us of that age-old axiom that it is better to give than to receive.

So the next time you are thinking about taking the car for an oil change or scheduling your preventive dental cleaning, we encourage you to stop for a moment and consider just what you are doing to maintain your relationship. Maybe it's time to visit a Martinez coffee shop for a latte and plan a stroll together down at the marina. Downtown has a plethora of restaurants to choose from for your dining pleasure. Perhaps after dinner, you might take in some live music at Armando's or visit the Campbell Cabaret for some live theatre. And that's just a small part of what Martinez has to offer. Beyond the bounds of our small town, "date night" possibilities are endless. Have fun keeping your love alive!

Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo are licensed marriage and family therapists and Martinez residents. Sue works for Superior Court in the family court mediation division, and Helen works as a therapist for Kaiser Permanente. Together, they share a therapy office in Lafayette where they work with individuals, couples, families, and children.

Originally published in the Martinez News Gazette, September 2011