

Keeping Love Alive

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

We see a lot of divorce in our office. Too much, really. Not that divorce isn't sometimes appropriate; almost everyone knows someone who has needed to be out of a marriage that was unsafe, unhappy or terribly debilitating. But every divorce, someone once said, is the collapse of a small civilization. Children and adult relationships break down. Both of us have known first hand the toll of divorce, and perhaps that is why we are both committed to helping people, whenever we can, to build strong relationships that will last a lifetime.

Falling in love is easy. It is what humans are made to do. We can fall in love with good people, and with bad people. When there is no one around to love, the urge to love is still there. When Serena first came to Canada, she fell in love with a kitten no more than five inches tall; so small that it fit in her hand. She would look at that kitten in wonder that something so small, but alive and warm, could mean so much to her. Those who know Monika may remember her first dog companion "Arrow".

Getting through good times with a loved one is also easy. When people first fall in love, their cheek muscles often get sore from smiling so much. These are important times, as they provide us with a starting point to remember and look back upon in years to come, when the going is a little rougher or when we need to remember one another in the best light possible.

Serena is fond of saying that the best predictors of long-term love are how people fight and how they grieve. Conflict and hard times are what test relationships. Less obvious is that conflict and hard times also build relationships as they temper and strengthen bonds.

Here are just a few of the things that we have learned about making the hard times work to build closer, stronger relationships. These rules apply to marriages and couple relationships, but they work equally well for friendships, sibling bonds, and for parent-child relationships in adulthood.

1. Remember the nice to "nasty" ratio. Every relationship involves saying things that the other loves to hear, like "I love your smile", and also things that are difficult to hear, like "please, pick up your socks". Relationships cannot thrive if the hard communications outnumber the loving and appreciative ones. In fact, it takes 3 to 5 "nices" to balance one "nasty"; and that is true only if the nasty is framed as nicely as possible, too! So take every opportunity to build up those "nice" credits with sincere compliments, expressions of affection, and loving gestures.

2. Monika has a favorite strategy for framing a grievance. She recommends beginning with a reassurance, such as: "Honey, I love you very much. I also need you to return the lid on the toothpaste because the leaky mess by the sink is driving me nuts." This works very well for those who find criticism uncomfortable and threatening. It's surprising how often a friendly reassurance makes disagreements easier to hear.

3. Stop to listen, and let your partner know you've heard them, before launching a counter-argument. It is amazing how far the words, "well, yes, I can see your point" go, even when they precede, "and I still think that there's another side that you should consider." Couples who can slow down and validate one another in the midst of a disagreement are much more likely to find a common solution, and much less likely to



feel damaged by the confrontation.

3. Take breaks if you need to in order to keep the tension at a manageable level. One way to do this is by restating your commitment to your partner, and your commitment to working through the issue. Then suggest a time to come back to the discussion with new calm and fresh energy. A break may be just the thing to help each get some perspective and move out of stuck positions. If one or both parties are tired or hungry, it is especially useful to take a break!

In one family we know this rule is very useful: No contentious topics after 10 pm. Arguments and discord will invariably occur and can be avoided if the topic can be postponed until the next day.

4. Practice makes perfect. Conflict is not something to be afraid of, or to avoid. But many individuals have tragic and frightening experiences with conflict, or they don't believe that they have the skills to get through it safely. These people often benefit from starting with small issues to build up their confidence and skill. Unfortunately, they often do just the opposite; they ignore the small conflicts for as long as they can, waiting until things build up to a crisis point before bringing any conflict out into the open. Then, they either bury the issue, or they blow up. Burying issues may make for a quiet household, but over time it means that individuals hold more and more back from one another. Without this information, they can become strangers. Blowing up has obvious drawbacks, too. Practice your skills at talking through things, while doing whatever it takes to stay as calm and confident as possible. Get some coaching, if you need it! Like all things, positive conflict can be learned.

5. Be there for one another's hard times. When we are grieving or struggling, it is important to be able to lean on the one who loves us. If they aren't there, our grief is compounded by disappointment in a relationship that we counted on. Words may not be necessary, nor do we need to fix what is wrong. If we're not sure what to do, it's fine to ask. Usually, touch or holding is just fine, so may be sitting together, or sharing a cup of tea.

6. Seek out people who support and respect your commitment to one another. Build a community around you so that you don't have to rely solely upon one another to get your emotional needs met. Listen to one another, and allow some complaints and venting; but also work on supporting your friends' relationships, and teach them how to support yours.

We would be amiss if we failed to mention the value of counselling in helping relationships through hard times. Especially when the same issues seem to keep coming around again and again without resolution, or when conflict no longer feels like a safe building process, a counselor can be very helpful. Relationships are a lot like gardens. Regular maintenance is time well spent. A new garden is an exciting project. But a mature garden represents years of effort, of frustration, of learning, and of wondrous discoveries. It is an accomplishment to savor, to treasure and to maintain.

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