



Tending Loves Flame: Keeping the Love Alive Transcript

Each year in the month of February, Valentine's Day places a spotlight on the intimate relationship in our lives. This celebration of Valentine's Day highlights the pleasures inherent in the intimacy between you and your sweetheart and provides an opportunity to celebrate and appreciate the gifts of love's bounty. Valentine's Day may act as a signal, or a reminder, to reflect on how grateful, satisfied, and enriched you are by your intimate relationship. It coaxes you to turn toward your loved one giving special attention to who they are and what you love about them.

It is also possible that Valentine's Day may be a sad reminder that your intimate relationship may be a source of hurt, conflict, disappointment, sadness, or frustration and you wish it were better. Valentine's Day may be a sort of wake-up call, alerting you to the reality that the initial excitement, interest, passion, intimacy, and communication that you once had has faded and that love has lost its luster.

Intimate relationships are a complex animal. We expect a lot from our relationships, sometimes maybe too much. In this age of instant gratification and disposable goods, many approach relationships with the unrealistic expectations that our intimate relationships should remain as sparkly as the first dates or provide a continuous dose of support, excitement, admiration, and affection.

The driving chemistry that drew you together in the initial stage of developing a relationship is intoxicating and powerful but eventually will settle into some perspective as your relationship evolves and you get to know your partner more fully. Typically, six months to a year into a new relationship, you no longer view your beloved through the rose-colored glasses of pure chemistry.

It's true that the chemistry provides that spark, and that spark can be nurtured and kept alive. It is also true that as you come to know your partner more fully what keeps you connected is not driven solely by that initial chemistry but is the loving investment you make in one another. Many times, people jump from relationship to relationship believing that something isn't working after the chemistry gives way to more reality. All relationships, if they are going to be sustained, will need to face reality and in that process, the "knock you off your feet" stupor that you experience in the beginning of the relationship will be tempered. The initial falling in love will travel towards, and settle into, a fuller knowledge of your partner, with intermittent sparks as opposed to a blissful stupor.



Now maybe you aren't one who is expecting to remain as starry eyed as in the beginning, but you realize your relationship has really lost some of its luster. Maybe you have become complacent or have found you are taking each other for granted. You may recognize that you no longer invest that special kind of energy or attention that you once had and as a result, your intimate relationship has become dull, lifeless or without spark at all.

What can you reasonably expect from your intimate relationship? Couples have so many real-life challenges to face that can wear away at the connection or that can drain the excitement, desire, energy, and fun from your connection. How do you nurture the moments of magic and intimacy as you face together the many challenges that are a part of your daily life? How can you also maintain that charge of passion, interest, and pleasure that you were flooded with in the early days and keep that spark of love alive?

These are tough questions and finding the answers or direction at times can feel overwhelming or discouraging. The challenges that intimate relationships face can be complex and negotiating the conflicts and struggles of your daily lives is not easy or always straightforward. All relationships even thriving positive relationships are challenged, have conflicts, fall into ruts, or struggle to maintain their connection and their magic. There are a million different stresses and strains that have the potential of wearing at your bond whether it is negotiating conflicts or managing your differences, coping with the demands on your time and energy, work, and home demands, caring for children, or financial and emotional strains. The reasons that potentially challenge you can be as varied as each couple.

Veteran spouses and significant others have their own unique set of added struggles that may contribute to difficulty in maintaining healthy intimate relationships. Multiple deployments and the subsequent physical and emotional wounds of war may contribute significantly to the instability and loss of connection that Veterans and their intimate partners' experience. Taking on the role of caregiver to an ill or injured partner is also going to affect how you view one another. Many Veterans and their intimate partners struggle with financial insecurity, unstable family, and friend networks, or lack the support needed to manage the many adversities that arise from military service. Let's face it, relationships can be tough even in the best of circumstances, so add all of the stressors that many military couples face, it is no wonder why your intimate relationships may suffer as a result.



Finding a way forward and negotiating the unique challenges that your relationship faces may also require exploring individualized or unique solutions for you and your partner. Maybe you will both consider asking for an objective, helping counselor, minister, or family therapist to assist you in finding a way forward. You may decide to explore if there are marriage enrichment groups or retreats in your community or in your VA as an option available to enhance your connection. What we would like to do in this presentation is to identify some general ideas or approaches that you might consider trying in order to improve the bond and the vitality in your relationship despite the challenges you face.

For you to move forward in enhancing your relationship, you have to be willing to explore and own that you contribute to both the relationship successes and its struggles. Intimate relationships are always a dynamic between two people, with each person having their own role in contributing to what goes well and what doesn't. It is very easy to point a finger, if they weren't this way or that way, or if they would change, or if they would behave differently, then we could be OK. If this is your argument, or your position, you will remain stuck and unable to engage in change.

Relationships are a dynamic with each partner's behavior contributing to another. For example, let's say you are hurt because you wish your partner were more appreciative of you. As a result of being hurt, you become cold or distant. Your partner may only see that you have become more distant and doesn't feel invited to be close or appreciative because you are behaving so cold or indifferent. Many of the dynamics in relationships are such that it is difficult to discern what came first the chicken or the egg. Because of the dynamic that occurs between two people it makes it critical that you be open to exploring what part you may be playing in things not going well and what part you wish to play in shifting the dynamics in a positive direction.

This puts you in a position of power even when you find yourself helpless to change the other person. When you own your part, possibilities, and choices to care for yourself open up. You can change your behavior, relate differently to your partner, or address your needs in other ways. Your contributions to the dynamic are what is within your control to change.

Taking ownership for the relationship empowers you also to decide to contribute to it in a positive way and in that personal investment; you change the dynamic between both of you. Some of you who have been hurt may not want to risk investing in the relationship and remain stuck in a position of thinking "if they behave differently then I



will try.” If you want your relationship to improve you have to own it and be willing to dig in and risk contributing to its improvement, you have to be willing to invest in it. It takes one person to change a dynamic for both. You can decide to make the effort, you can decide to take the risk to give of yourself, to give in, to not hold back on all the positive ways you may contribute to your relationship thriving.

The difficult part may be taking the risk of giving of yourself and investing in positive change, and not seeing an immediate reciprocal response from your partner. Sometimes your loving efforts are delivered with an expectation that it will change the other person and when they don't respond positively then you get discouraged and want to give up. That's understandable but it is important to remember one loving act won't change a pattern that's been established over time. It takes many small investments over time. It can be difficult to keep investing, being patient, especially when you are hungry for your relationship to provide you what you may desire.

Sometimes couples can get discouraged with the challenges, that you believe that something big has to change, when really it is the many small loving steps made each day, that can begin to shift the momentum back to keeping the fire going.

Loving someone in reality, beyond the initial falling in love drama, is an act of giving. Any fool can fall in love; it's effortless. Truly loving requires giving, giving when you don't feel like it, patience when its run thin, and acceptance that your partner is the imperfect being they are. This act of loving is something that makes you grow and expand as an individual. It is this loving that deepens your connection and is the bedrock of what fuels the fire between you.

Even if your partner does not reciprocate your love in the way that you want or need, even if you come to find that overtime the relationship is not going to work out, you will have loved, and there is no loss or shame for you in loving generously. What you do ensure by giving of yourself in many small ways each day is the potential that your relationship will be nourished and will thrive as a result of this investment.

What positive behaviors can you engage in to support the shine returning to your loved one's eyes? What behaviors can you invest in that will build a storehouse of loving connection that can hold you both together despite the challenges you face? These are the behaviors we want to explore in this presentation.

Most relationships begin with an experience of being drawn to someone and there is often chemistry or energy when you are together that feels strong, compelling,



or magical. Some of the qualities that encourage that spark in the early days of falling in love are the very qualities that you might consider investing in now to have that spark return.

This beginning chemistry isn't something that you had to work at, it just is, and it feels great. This chemistry as we mentioned earlier is tempered with time and knowledge of the full reality of who your partner is. Keeping or enhancing the sparks of chemistry, requires nurturing, if you want to keep it alive, and this does take some conscious effort.

One key word in this nurturing of chemistry is attention. In the beginning, your attention to your partner was enhanced and you looked for and paid attention to the qualities in them that you admired, found attractive, and appealing. They were a mystery. You wanted to learn about them and paid great attention to all the qualities and positive strengths that were appealing to you. Every encounter was new, unpredictable, a surprise. Showering them with your attention came easily.

Over time, you did come to know them more and they became less of a surprise. As a result, you may have stopped paying attention to them in the same way. Maybe you even started focusing exclusively on the things that you became aware that you didn't like.

The reality is, your loved one is never fully known. You are each a mystery, with your own private thoughts, feelings, wishes, desires and aspirations. Recognizing you don't know everything about your loved one can cause you to feel a bit vulnerable or insecure and it also can invite opportunities to explore, listen, and affirm who they are. When you approach your partner as the ever-changing mystery that they are, you are then inviting that interest and appreciation back into the present.

There is something very important and revitalizing about remaining curious about your loved one and realizing they have an interior and exterior life that you can't know completely. How do you feel when someone pays attention and is interested in who you are? How is it for you when someone is interested in what you think or feel, interested in your hobbies and friends, your strengths and weaknesses? It feels good to have that kind of attention. This is something that you can give to your partner again.

Listening to your partner is another active way to bring that loving attention back to your partnership. People change over time so your knowledge of them is never complete. Listening is one way that will deepen your understanding and appreciation



for how they are different and unique from you. Listening assumes that you don't know what is in their heart or mind and that you want to know.

Listen without interruption, without preparing a response in your head, or chomping at the bit to get in your point across. Listen with the intent of solely focusing on trying to hear, understand, and appreciate what the other person is experiencing or describing. Put yourself in their shoes and get a feel for what it is like for them. Listening and truly being open to their perspective supports their individuality and provides an opportunity for each of you to influence each other. This is the kind of listening that builds an intimate connection. Nothing bridges a conflict or creates a connection like really listening to your partner.

You can give this attention to your partner by taking the time to ask about what matters to them and truly listening. What does your partner like to talk about? What are they interested in? Do you check in each day to inquire about what they are up to, who they spend time with, or how their day went? Do you ask and listen to their opinions about politics, current events, or just their view of the world around them? Have you inquired about their idea of fun? How much do you know about their past, and what do you want to know about their hopes or concerns for the future? Have you paid attention to their accomplishments and or the goals they would like to work on? What do they want or wish for? Listening to your partner generously, as if you cherish learning about them, can ignite the sparks of connection for both of you.

Another form of attention that you gave so wholeheartedly in the beginning was to pay attention, notice, and focus on, all the qualities in them that you loved, admired, or found attractive. Not only did you focus intently in the beginning on all the wonderful qualities you also communicated how much you loved these qualities. Has this changed? Just think of how it might transform your connection if you were to make a conscious decision to pay attention and let them know each day the positive things you notice and love about them.

When was the last time you told your partner how much you appreciate them? Such as, "I don't know what I would do without you, thanks for taking care of that." When was the last time you commented on how great they look or that you find them attractive "Oh wow you look so handsome in that shirt" or " your eyes are beautiful today", "Wow, how lucky am to have such a gorgeous date" Are you letting your loved one know how much you appreciate all that they do for you? "Thanks, sweetheart, for always making sure my car is serviced, or honey that dinner you made, it was amazing."



Do you share just how lucky you feel to have their love, “you know every day I count my blessings that I found you.” Do you still pay attention to how unique your loved one is, and the ways in which you admire or cherish them? “I really appreciate how smart you are when it comes to handling the finances, or I really admire your commitment to helping the kids with their homework, or you make everyone laugh and have a great time, I just love that about you.”

Many times, people are surprised how important and powerful this kind of attention is, and how much it can bolster that loving feeling. Even if your loved one acts as if they don’t need this kind of feedback, it is human nature to need appreciation. How much does it cost you to begin to notice all the many small and large ways your partner is appreciated, and desired? Interestingly, not only does it bolster your partner, making a conscious effort daily to pay attention to what you love, desire, and appreciate about your partner will actually cause you to focus more on what you love and enhance those positives. See for yourself how this kind of daily appreciation can alter the dynamics and build some sparks between you both.

Another way to build a loving connection with your partner is to engage in activities or rituals where you are spending time together and nurturing that connection. While it is important to have time apart, it is also important to find ways that you can count on connecting. Taking a walk each evening, have a special date each week, celebrate your anniversary, engage in weekly chores or shared interests, evening mealtimes, or morning coffee to build on that connection. Having time that you know is devoted to being together as well as having time apart contributes to your connection.

The sparks are also encouraged with the gift of affection. Physical affection and sexual intimacy feed the overall health and vibrancy of your relationship. Physical affection and the desire that may have been prominent in the beginning of your relationship may diminish with time and there may be a number of factors that contribute to this change.

Changes in desire and giving of affection may be the result of the many challenges and demands of daily life. Keeping that fire alive while also managing the demands on your time and attention due to work, caring for children, caring for your home, managing stresses and strains of finances, health and the many other needs and demands for your time, can affect the attention given to affection and intimacy.

Certainly, the challenges that you caregivers and your ill Veterans face can further affect physical closeness and sexual intimacy. Physical and psychological



injuries or illnesses can affect your desire, your self-concept, your ability to engage in sexual activity, and your comfortability with closeness and physical affection. Desire may also be affected as a result of coming to view your partner through the lens of their role such as; caregiver, ill Veteran, or parent, rather than as you did in the beginning as someone you see as the unique attractive separate individual that they are. How you view your partner and how you relate to them as a result of that view, can affect intimacy and desire.

One important aspect that contributes to desire is seeing your partner not as an extension of yourself, or through the lens of a role, but recognizing them as an individual, with the awareness that you want them and don't own them. Desire can fall away if you take for granted that they are yours. Desire can falter if you no longer purposely view them as the separate, unique, appealing, sexy, catch that they are.

Sometimes being lulled into feeling of security that we all need and seek in intimate relationships may inadvertently result in taking your commitment for granted. You may have begun operating as if you already won the prize. You may operate under the assumption they are already yours, so you don't need to do anything to keep them.

Feeling secure in your intimate relationship is important. You want to be able to trust that you can count on your partner, that they are committed to you, and that they will be there for you. This security helps you to open up and show them your vulnerable side. This security and the familiarity of your partner deepens your love, with time and experience. It's comforting to know that even on your worst day, when you are moody or irritable, sick or scared, on those days where you wouldn't want your worst enemy to see you because you look like such a train wreck, your loved one is there still loving you. There is comfort and security in knowing that you are loved.

Sometimes, however, that comfort, familiarity, and security doesn't always translate to feelings of desire. Part of what contributed to your desire in the beginning was the fact that they were a mystery. Another aspect that contributed to the desire in the beginning was that you didn't take their love for you for granted. Awareness of your vulnerability, appreciation, affection, desire, and sexual intimacy, are powerful tools that enhance the strength, tenderness, vibrancy, and health of your bond. How might you invest in enhancing this aspect in your relationship?

Desire can grow in being vulnerable and with the awareness that their love is not a given to be taken for granted. Desire can grow when you treat your beloved like a mystery unfolding. Desire can grow by paying close attention to what you are drawn to



in your lover, their eyes or smile, the way they take charge, their intellect, their charisma, their playfulness, their competence, their bodies. Desire can grow when you keep the awareness close to you that your partner's presence is not a given and that their presence in your life is a gift.

Desire can also grow with the recognition that you are also a gift to them. Remembering to see yourself as someone of value, someone who is desirable, and someone who deserves attention, contributes to fueling the flames of desire in your partner. Remember your gifts, strengths, talents, and recognize the value of what you bring to the relationship. Seeing your own value and respecting yourself is attractive to your partner.

Put forth the energy and effort that you did in the beginning to shine yourself up and present your desirable self to your partner. Making the extra effort to get dressed up for a date or to pay special care with how you look and what you wear, can get that attention back. It's great to know they love you when you at your worst, but it sure can help to remind them and yourself, how dazzling you are at your best!

Affection is another source of maintaining the love between you both. Affection is a healing balm, a source of comfort and soothing, a bridge to closeness, and a path that leads to intimacy and sexuality. Affection can heal the distance of conflict and provide an avenue to closeness.

Engage in affection as a way to keep the loving connection alive whether it is kissing good morning or good night, snuggling up together on the couch, holding hands, hugging, or those moments of surprise affection when you reach out and let your partner know you love and desire them. Giving your loved one a massage can be a wonderful way to care and restore your connection. Even if your loved one is struggling with physical or psychological distress, affection can be a healing balm that diminishes that pain or distress. The power of touch and the tenderness of regular affection have the capacity to feed the hunger for closeness and buffer you both from the trials you face.

You can, despite challenges, make positive steps towards improving the satisfaction and vitality of your relationship by re-investing your energy and attention to your loved one in many small incremental daily attempts. Start with an attitude of owning responsibility for both the strengths and the struggles that you share. Change the dynamic between you both by shifting your behavior. You decide, to take the steps yourself to invest in the health and vitality of your relationship without holding back, holding out, or counting what your partner has contributed.



Nurture the return of the chemistry between you by actively paying attention to your partner. Be curious, ask them about themselves, show interest, and listen with the desire to understand their perspective. Make times in your day to check in and make special times to just talk and listen. Explore who they are with the awareness that they are never a known entity.

Bring your attention to all the wonderful things about them that attracted you in the first place. Pay attention, look for, and notice the specific qualities that you love, appreciate, and admire. Instead of just the standard, "I love you," give the specific quality or attribute that you love and appreciate as it strikes you. Share appreciation regularly, try even daily. This appreciation is a gift that builds up your partner and builds on your positive connection.

Take a risk, reach out, make a special effort, surprise them, treat them to a special love note, or gift out of the blue. Remember that although you may be comforted by the security of your commitment, your relationship is not a given to take for granted. Remember the gift that you have been given and remember the gift that you are to your partner. Each of you is separate and unique, you are not just the roles that you engage in, nor defined by who you are as a couple. Admiring your partner as a separate and whole person, as well as, respecting who you are as an individual will contribute to your appreciation and interest in each other.

Make a habit of reaching out and sharing your affection for your loved one. Make time together to engage in shared interests or shared ritual activities that you can count on or look forward to. Make a regular date night or times you make a conscious effort to spruce yourself up and treat them to a romantic date. The flames of love can fire again by paying attention to what you desire and taking the risk of sharing that desire. The investment of affection, in all its many forms, can renew the loving connection that holds you together and keeps you warm as you face your lives together.

All relationships have conflicts and struggles; you are not alone in that. All relationships lose their luster at times but that doesn't mean you can't get the shine back. You can decide to simply give it some needed attention. You can find hope in knowing that you can make positive changes to inspire and reinvigorate the flames of love and attraction that brought you together. You can ignite those flames again now with your decision to invest your heart, your attention, and your energy. We support you in your efforts and hope that you find in your efforts that the fire returns.



Before we end our time together, we wanted to encourage you if you are interested to listen to our pre-recorded meditation titled Relationship Meditation: Restoring Loving Kindness to Yourself and Your Significant Other from the Caregiver Support Program Website. To navigate to our Web Site, go to www.caregiver.va.gov . We hope you may use this meditation exercise to support you and the continued loving attention towards your partner.