Keeping the Flame Alive - Relationships with significant others

From the moment we are born we are into relationships between ourselves and others. We begin the initial relationships that provided basic necessities of life - food and shelter. Then we grew and over time our relationships deepen and our circles expanded. We grew - we learned how to live, how to trust, how to have fun, how to be vulnerable, how to be hurt, how to be strong. The list goes on.

As a therapist I have explored many aspects of these relationships. Nothing fascinates me more than the dynamic connection that people have with their significant others. I have counselled many couples over the years. I have helped some couples to part - most often in an amicable fashion. A few were not committed to the process and the relationship was dead before they met me. Many others, I have had the luxury and the privilege to coach and guide back together and witness a re-kindling of their relationship that somehow got lost along the way. Here are a few relationship building activities that I have used with my clients that, over the years in my practice, have proven to work. I would encourage you and your significant other to try one or two of these techniques to improve your success and enjoyment in your relationship.

1) The Mystery Date - Remember how exciting dating can be. Many of us can remember the adrenaline rush of our first dates. Use that to your relationships advantage. Each month one partner plans a mystery date based on what they know about their partner’s likes - for instance, hiking, a movie, a love of pizza, a local hockey game, a car show and on the list goes. The planner arranges any caregiving/babysitting if needed and makes sure their partner is free within a given time frame and a specific day. The planner gives their “date” a summary of what they will need to wear. For example, that might be jeans and sturdy shoes if you are going hiking or “dress up” clothes for other activities or dress warmly if going skiing. The planner can leave a note finalizing the time, mode of dress and the day. The date remains a mystery to the non-planner. As is often the case in first dates, care must be taken to ensure the non-planner will truly enjoy the activity.

There have been so many remarkable stories over the years about mystery dates that my clients have gone on, however there is one that stands out for me. The planning partner surprised their significant other with roses, champagne and a limousine ride to a local theatre production. They had been married several decades and had just wanted to put some play back into their marriage. This event was such an expression of love and consideration, the couple talked about this experience for some time to come.
2) The Pickle Jar - Each partner finds an empty jar (eg. rinsed out jam, mason or pickle jar). Over the course of the week, each partner writes on individual slips of paper recording the random acts of kindness they receive from their partner each and every day. What qualifies as a small random measurable act of kindness? These often are the simple things like: remembering to say thank you, fixing breakfast, doing something that you might not normally do, folding laundry, buying a treat or flowers, offering to get milk on the way home, planning a meal - all of these would qualify. At the end of week they sit down together and share these pieces of paper with each other. We are so busy in our daily lives that we often miss the random acts of kindness. We stop noticing and appreciating what our partners have done. It becomes too easy in this extremely busy world to stop noticing. We tend to focus on what has not been done or needs to be done rather than sharing what has been done, sharing the small good parts of the day and noticing each other. We often take these small things for granted.

3) Cup of Expectations - Over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine etc. and write down your belief about relationships and what your expectations are. Share both your beliefs as well as your expectations. Discuss, recognize and respect your differences. Identify the similarities. This activity can be extremely powerful as we often don’t share these expectations openly. In relationships, we often make the mistake of expecting that others want the same thing we do. In many cases, this simple activity can open whole new conversations all the while clarifying and strengthening the relationship.

4) Synching Schedule - Nothing gets the juices running than a conversation around time and money. After all, don’t most business relationships revolve around these 2 important factors? These factors are also very important in a significant relationship. This activity, although not as glamorous as going out on a mystery date, brings great discussion. Every week, on a Saturday or Sunday night, sit down together and look at the schedules for coming week. Be sure to plan some together time. Listen and learn what is going on in each other’s lives. Even if you already know what is going on, by listening to your significant other you are providing an opportunity to share in each other’s lives. Be sure to include a conversation around the upcoming expenses. Sharing the details, no matter how small brings us close together as a team. When it comes to money, be sure to be singing from the same page.

Investing allows one to strengthen the bond and deepen the relationship adding to the longevity of your journey together.

Remember you can call your EAP service provider for assistance with relationship challenges, financial difficulties. We can help you address these challenges and make your stronger and healthier.

“We’ve got this gift of love, but love is like a precious plant. You can’t just accept it and leave it in the cupboard or just think it’s going to get on by itself. You’ve got to keep watering it. You’ve got to really look after it and nurture.”

John Lennon