

be resilient

A publication of the Employee Assistance Centre

Love is in the Little Things

Healthy Couple Fact: Happy couples are couples who regularly make time to connect. Connection is most meaningful if it happens in the form of small, consistent actions.

Couple relationships are complex and unique to the individuals who co-create them. Every couple will at some point in their relationship be faced with challenges that may bring them together or pull them apart.

When we speak about this dynamic of coming together and moving apart in relationships, we refer to it as an attachment pattern. We usually learn our patterns of attachment in our family of origin – the family we grew up in. When we form couple relationships in adulthood, we take the things we learned in those developmental years and combine them with the things our partner learned in their family to co-create the dynamic that we experience in our intimate relationship.

When we face challenges as a couple, this dynamic is magnified, so if things are shaky under normal circumstances, they can break down quickly when we're under stress. However, if we typically enjoy a strong, connected relationship,

stress might bring us closer together – or at least, we'll ride it out more smoothly. What defines whether we thrive or struggle as a couple comes down to our attachment patterns and our level of connection with our partner.

Think of attachment patterns as the music of a relationship. When we're in a relationship with another person, the music is playing, and the music is created by the instruments we learned to play in our growing years. Our level of connection to our partner is like the tuning of those instruments. If we regularly invest time and energy into meaningfully connecting with our partner, the instruments are in tune, the music is beautiful, and the dance we do together is smooth. We can even laugh about it when someone gets their foot stepped on.

However, when we're disconnected, the song plays out of tune and everything sounds like nails on a blackboard. If there is a dance, it might feel more like a poorly executed version of the "Thriller" music video, and no one is laughing at the foot stomps.

So, a functioning relationship requires couples to nurture their connection, so that the instruments play in tune and they

Did you know?

In-person counselling isn't your only option. You can also arrange counselling through other methods, including online video conferencing/Telehealth, email counselling (Let's Talk) and phone.

Your EAP is managed by a highly trained and multi-disciplinary network of counsellors. Relationship counselling for couples is offered by qualified and experienced MMFTs/therapists.

can enjoy the beautiful music of being mutually attuned.

Many couples get a deer-in-the-headlights look when I ask about connection, either because they aren't aware of how they've been successful at connecting in the past, or they're not sure where to start to weave in new sources of connection if their relationship has undergone a fundamental change that requires some adaptation.

Fortunately, meaningful connection isn't intellectually challenging – there are countless ways to do it! However, for couples who are already in a rough spot, they may not be in the emotional space necessary to make efforts at, or benefit from, connecting activities. These couples are best directed to a relationship therapist who can offer support and help begin the healing process before things get worse.

Connection is most meaningful if it happens in the form of small, consistent actions.

When I speak to couples about activities that connect them, the topic of date nights usually arises early in the conversation, and you might be surprised to know that I'm not the one raising the subject. Couples and families are busier than ever. Although a date night is a great idea, we often lack the time or other resources to have an elaborate night out. The last thing I want is to further overwhelm a struggling couple with something that should be positive but ends up feeling like a chore or another problem to solve.

Below is a list of small ways to connect with your partner that have serious value, because they're manageable and easier to weave into your daily life than a date night that requires a babysitter. Most of them require little time and no money. Try making up your own list, too! This works especially well (and is easiest to do) when you recall the ways that you have connected in the past and intentionally incorporate them again or more often:

1. Make a meal plan together
2. Shop for groceries together
3. Dance to a song
4. Hug for 20 seconds
5. Finish the sentence, "I appreciate [blank] about you."
6. Offer an apology
7. Have a staring contest
8. Ask your partner, "If we could do anything you like for 15 minutes, what would you choose?"
9. Do the thing your partner chose
10. Play a board/card game
11. Have decaf coffee or tea together in the evening
12. Make a "No devices in/at the ____" rule
13. Take a 10-minute walk together
14. Make up a new pet name for your partner
15. Write a love note in seven words or less
16. Identify a need that your partner has met

17. Identify a need that your partner hasn't met yet
18. Play a sport together
19. Schedule a weekly 30-minute "talk time"
20. Have a re-run of your first date or remember your first date together
21. Set a goal together that you can achieve in a week
22. Tell your partner about a worry you have
23. Hold hands in the car
24. Ask, "How could I make your day better today?"
25. Talk about the kind of relationship you'd like your child to have with their future spouse
26. Take the Five Love Languages quiz at 5lovelanguages.com

Relationships require consistent and intentional effort, even more so in times of crisis or stress. If your relationship is in a place where the above list feels impossible or unhelpful, it might be a good time to check in with a therapist. The Employee Assistance Program at Manitoba Blue Cross offers relationship counselling for couples at every stage, with service delivery methods and appointment availability to suit your needs.

– **Jodie Voth, RMFT**

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.

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Consult a professional (counsellor, physician, etc.) before taking action with respect to any topics discussed.

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